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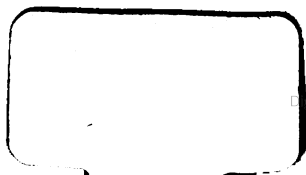
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A Woman at Bay

By

Helen Bayliss

Author of

"A Woman in the City," "Slaves of Passion,"
"An Act of Impulse"



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John Long

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BOOK I

A WOMAN AT BAY

CHAPTER I

META

"I WONDER how long it is going to last? I am getting so tired of this wretched, homeless existence." A heavy sigh accompanied these words; they were uttered by a girl of some two-and-twenty years, as she sat by the fire in the school-room of the Manor House, Congleton, Cheshire.

Her face wore a very sad, careworn expression. She had that morning received a peremptory notice to leave, having been weighed in her employer's balance and found wanting.

This was her ninth engagement as governess; and this also was the ninth occasion on which she was asked to go, as she did not suit. An inward rage is just then consuming her, for she considers she has been unfairly treated. The weather, too, is much against the preservation of a cheerful temper: it is a bitterly cold afternoon in the month of January, and intensely foggy.

The school-room she sits in is not pretty or comfortable: it is a long, low-ceilinged, old-fashioned apartment, with shabby school-books scattered here and there; ink-marked maps covers the walls, and the floor is spread with oil-cloth. Over the mantelpiece, right in front of her, is a large engraving, framed in black

A Woman at Bay

oak, representing "The Triumph of Christianity," an awe-inspiring, dismal sort of picture to look at; it had the effect of increasing her wretchedness whenever her glance fell in that direction. Her experience of the Christian religion had proved anything but a triumph, and the picture was, and had always been, an eyesore to her during the three months of her residence in the Manor House. A small table furnished with all the implements for writing had been drawn near her chair; the pen even had been dipped into the ink and lay wet on the blotting-paper—but thoughts were wanting, and therefore as yet nothing was written on the clean note-paper. Presently, however, as though impelled by sheer necessity, she turned towards the table, and taking up the quill scribbled the following lines,—

"DEAR AUNT,—I am leaving Mrs Bankes to-morrow, and shall be glad if you could accommodate me for a short time, until I am suited. I am falsely accused of general misbehaviour, although I myself fail to see in what way I have done amiss. I have tried to do my best and to give satisfaction, but some people are never contented, no matter how much you endeavour to please them, and Mrs Bankes gives me this impression. She thinks it advisable for me to leave without proper notice, so please expect me to-morrow.—With love, believe me, yours very affectionately,—
META."

"There, that will do, I think! I shall not go into all the disagreeable details of my dismissal without proper notice. I can tell her all that when I see her."

She then sealed her letter and addressed it to,—

MISS WILTON,
4 Tudor Road,
Notting Hill.

She rang the bell, and on the servant answering, desired her to post it.

Meta

For some little time she continued thoughtfully gazing into the fire ; it was the only cheer-inspiring object in that bare, barrack-like room, and its warm blaze was an inviting contrast to the dense fog outside. Gradually the young face loses its careworn expression, as pleasanter thoughts take possession of her mind, and the richly-curved lips are smilingly parted, and she begins again to dream dreams, to hope better and brighter things for the future—to forget the dark cheerless present in the fancy-castles she is mentally building. Youth is not without its compensations, and this capacity to forget, is one of them.

Suddenly her meditations were interrupted by the abrupt opening of the door, and a tall, middle-aged lady entered. She glanced sharply at the girl ; in her hand she held a letter (the very one we have just been reading). She laid this on the large school-room table, and her countenance flashed an unmistakable look of hate on the young governess as she said,—

“I think, Miss Benson, I ought to make it clear to you before you leave, that should you, in the event of seeking another engagement, require a reference, on no account refer any one to me. After your disgraceful conduct in this house, such a favour would be impossible. Here is your letter (indicating the missive), you had better post it yourself. It is, I presume, addressed to your aunt ? I shall myself write to Miss Wilton and explain to her the reason of your sudden departure.”

“Mind you speak the truth then !” burst out Meta passionately. “Your beautiful husband is as much to blame as I am, and even more so, for he ought to have known better than rouse your jealousy by showing me unnecessary and unwelcome attentions. As for the reference, I shouldn’t dream of referring anyone to you.”

She stopped, out of breath, astonished at her own daring. The impulse in her to speak her mind had been too strong to control. She looked now the picture of penitence.

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Her employer paid no heed to her change of countenance; her own had been a sight to see whilst Meta was speaking. If the venom expressed on it could have annihilated the young governess, it would have done so then, and my story would never have been written. Meta Benson would have been a heap of ruin, a mutilated mass of what was once good and pleasant to look at. Mrs Bankes, however, said nothing in reply, only with that ugly look on her face she turned and left the room.

Meta breathed a sigh of relief, though her vexation was still keenly felt. "Disagreeable old toad!" she exclaimed angrily, "she knows well how I hate going out in bad weather, and that is why she wants me to post my letter myself. I wish the fog would choke her, I do. How unnecessary of her to come and tell me about the reference. It isn't likely I should ever ask her for one, knowing her amiable feelings towards me."

She sat silent for some minutes, undecided as to what she had better do. One thing was very evident—Miss Wilton must be made acquainted with her niece's speedy advent, and if the letter was not posted within the next hour, it would certainly not reach its destination in time, since the village town of Congleton, twenty years ago, boasted of only one collection daily—and this collection was due at half-past five.

Meta glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was nearly five, and the little country post-office was fully half a mile from the Manor House.

She thought of the distance with a shudder, which was accentuated into disgust when she walked to the window and saw that the fog was increasing with the darkness, and it was as unpleasant as it could possibly be. Hitherto all her letters and those of the household had been posted by the boot-boy, whose business it was. The regular custom was to despatch him daily at five o'clock,—but to-day, it seemed, this convenience was not to be

Meta

enjoyed by her. She was in mortal disgrace with the lady of the Manor House, and she was made to feel it. Then there was the disagreeable reflection that the letter would not ensure her a cordial welcome at 4 Tudor Road, but only a chilly consent to shelter the writer until she had again met with "something suitable."

It must, however, go, so, with a heavy sigh, the girl proceeded to put on necessary protection against the weather. Whilst she did this, a happy thought suggested itself to her—she would meet the boot-boy in the carriage drive and bribe him with a sixpence to post it. This idea cheered her not a little, and it was with a lightened heart she ran down the schoolroom stairs, intent on carrying it out.

The Manor House drive was a long one; Meta walked half-way, feeling nearly suffocated with the dense atmosphere; she resolved to shelter herself in the summer-house hard by, until she could hear the footsteps of the boy and waylay him. She had not to wait long; tramp, tramp, tramp, they sounded very loud and distinct in the fog. She darted out with a bound in her usual impulsive way, fearing to miss him.

"Here, John," she cried, "post this letter for me like a good boy; and here is sixpence for your trouble."

In her eagerness she had miscalculated the distance of the oncomer, and had unwisely precipitated herself into the arms—not of the youthful John, alas! but those of Major John Bankes, the cause of all her trouble and disgrace! Before she had realized her mistake he had caught her to him, saying with a laugh—"You are right, my name is John, indeed, and I will gladly post your letter for you."

"Let me go!" she cried, furious at this impertinence. "How dare you? Let me go this instant," for he still held her fast.

"Not till I have had my reward," said he, and forgetting his position as a gentleman, Major Bankes stooped forward and impressed a kiss on the face of

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his children's governess. Meta was too angry to pick her words; had her small hands been free, she would have administered a severe cuffing on the Major's ears, and made them tingle for him, but, unfortunately, he gripped them securely in his own, guessing too well her intention.

"Forgive me, Miss Benson," he interrupted her coolly, "but I am only doing what any other man in my foggy circumstances would do."

"You are a nice pair, you are, to a friendless dependent like myself," she burst out, disgustedly moving away from him.

"I know," he returned, without heeding her, and yet keeping her within touch as he was speaking. "I know that I have been much to blame in all that has befallen you, but I am most anxious to make up for my fault if you will let me. Listen," and he lowered his voice confidentially. "I heard you leave by the school-room door; I knew all about the letter, and I was determined to save you from your unpleasant walk. Also, I came to tell you how annoyed I have been by my wife's rudeness to you. You shall not suffer through it, of that I am determined. It is but right some compensation should be made you in lieu of the quarter's notice you are entitled to. Hush, there is a step. Good-bye, and please forgive me, Miss Benson, I am very, very sorry." He thrust an envelope into her hand, and disappeared into the darkness.

Meta drew a long breath, then turned quickly on her way to the house, when, behold! she had not taken three steps when she came face to face with the boot-boy. Had he been a ghost she could not have been more startled. Her cheeks crimsoned as she thought of the probability of his having overheard what had passed between them. Certainly his stumpy little face as he stared at her wore a very impudent, knowing expression.

She recovered her self-possession however sufficiently to say almost indifferently:—

Meta

"I have been waiting for you. Will you send a telegram for me? I will give you a shilling for your trouble."

"No, that I won't," said John, the boot-boy, rudely. "What do you want to send a telegram for, when master has just gone to post your letter?"

He gave her an insolent look that made her proud nature recoil with disgust. Not waiting to hear more, she flew down the drive and had regained her room long before the surly little plebeian had finished wondering whether he had done wisely in refusing the bribe for his service.

"She ain't up to much," were his thoughts. "I wonder what the missus will say about her goings-on with the master. Guess there will be no end of a rumpus!" With this idea surging in the immensity of his intellect and awaking his young faculties to a sense of the prudence necessary if he meant to keep his place and seven shillings a week wages, the boot-boy John doggedly threaded his way through the fog within a hundred feet of his employer and namesake.

As soon as Meta found herself in the safety of her own room with the door locked against all intruders, she, without any scruple, unsealed the envelope, which had been given her, and satisfied her burning curiosity as to its contents. Wrapped up in a sheet of paper were two crisp five-pound bank-notes. Her first thought was that it would not be right for her to keep them; her second overruled the objection with the sure knowledge that "necessity has no law"; she would require every shilling of the money whilst seeking another engagement; and then Major Bankes had given it her as an honourable compensation for her summary dismissal. She would be paid her full quarter's salary to-morrow, and it would amount to seven pounds ten shillings. She had a right at least to a three months' notice; the notes were there as a substitute. Pleased with her philosophical reasoning, she banished such scruples of propriety as her

A Woman at Bay

pride and good-breeding had suggested to her, and with a sigh of satisfaction deposited the notes in her purse.

"It would be intensely foolish to quarrel with my bread and butter," she reflected sagely enough. "After all, it is his money, whether it comes from her or not. If she had been just and considerate, she would have offered me something of the sort, instead of insulting me, and telling me that she would not give me a reference even if I asked for it. Heigho! I have still all my packing to do, and the sooner I set about it the better."

CHAPTER II

A THORNY PATH

THE next morning was fine as the previous one was foggy. It was with an uncertain sort of feeling that Meta opened her eyes and calculated her chances of happiness. She was secretly dreading the meeting with her aunt, and looked forward with no pleasurable sense of anticipation to the wearisome task before her of seeking another situation. But it had to be done, however wearisome, and as she was young and full of hope for the future, the weight of this trouble did not overwhelm her. She got up and dressed, and then finished her packing. When she was ready she went straight to the school-room, expecting to find her five pupils assembled for breakfast. They were not there: the room was empty and fireless.

A deep flush suffused her face as she stared at the cloth on which was laid a knife and fork, and guessed the reason of it. The children were forbidden by their mother to have any further communication with the governess. She felt this with the true instinct born of a sensitive, passionate nature, that often anticipates slights and seldom mistakes, or ignores, the hidden meaning of an insult. Mrs Bankes was a good hater, and knew well

A Thorny Path

how to treat those whom she hated, and Meta was one of them. Whilst the girl thus reflected with that crimson flush still on her pretty face, the school-room maid Jane, entered with the tea, toast and egg on a tray.

"The children will breakfast with their mamma, Miss Benson," said she, as she plumped the articles on the table, giving Meta an insolent stare.

The boot-boy had evidently been telling tales, for the servants' hall was already made acquainted (under promise of strict secrecy) with the full details of yester-evening's adventure between the master and the governess. Possibly John was of an inventive disposition, for his tale was garnished with romantic variations which had fairly shocked the denizens of the back-stairs. This idea possessed Meta with a thrilling sense of shame as she fully understood and *felt* the servant's intended slight.

"But it could not be helped," she philosophically remarked to herself as Jane left the room. "I shall be leaving this house in another hour or so more, and I must just put up with their impudence as best I can." Her conscience, however, pricked her in regard to her behaviour and her cool reception of the two five-pound notes. She was wavering in her mind as to the advisability of returning them to Major Banks when the door again opened to admit Jane.

"Here," said she, tartly, "this is from mistress. I am to wait for a receipt." And she placed a note on the table.

Meta opened it and found therein a cheque—her quarter's salary—also these few lines from Mrs Banks.

"Enclosed is your money due to-day, for which kindly send acknowledgment by bearer. The dogcart will be at the door at ten o'clock precisely to convey you and your luggage to the station. Please do not keep it waiting.
MARY BANKES."

A Woman at Bay

Meta tore off the blank leaf of this affectionate piece of composition, and pulling out a stencil from her pocket she scribbled the following :—

“I acknowledge with grateful thanks the quarter’s salary due to me, 19th January, 18—.

“(Signed) META BENSON.”

She inserted it in the envelope and returned it to Jane, who had been casting in her mind whether it would not be just as well to be civil to the governess on the strength of a stray half-crown finding its way to her pocket.

“If there is anything I can do for you, miss, I shall be very glad,” said that eye-serving Abigail, as she took the note and waited for a reply.

Meta glanced at her astonished. “No,” she returned coldly, “there is nothing you can do for me, except to be as civil as you can until I’ve left.”

“Well, you see, miss, it is impossible not to lose one’s temper sometimes with all those children worritting one crazy : mistress does spoil them so.” And Jane looked wonderfully meek as she said this, and felt a tip was a tip no matter where it came from.

Meta smiled ; she saw through it all. There was, she thought, no reason why she should part in enmity with one, who, perhaps, if bribed with a little money might speak well of her when she was gone. Meta had her purse in her hand, she took from it the half-crown she had intended for her cab-fare, and presented it to Jane.

“I shall be glad if you will come and tell me when the dogcart is at the door, and also help to take my luggage down,” she said pleasantly.

The maid pocketed the money and disappeared with a “Thank you, miss,” that would have mollified a much harder heart than Meta’s.

But the half-crown let us say, once for all, was wasted,

A Thorny Path

for she never appeared again ; but left the announcement of the dogcart to surly Jameson, the groom, who marched in noisily "for to take the luggage down," he explained, and Meta took her departure in absolute silence. There was not a soul in the hall ; the house seemed deserted by everybody. She took her place in the high stanhope beside the driver and glanced up at the windows with a feeling of bitterness that she should have left any situation under such humiliating circumstances.

"I feel as if I had done something very disgraceful," she reflected uneasily, as she drove away. "But it is all of a piece with everything else that I shall have to put up with as long as I am a governess. I must make haste and get married—it is the only way out of the difficulty." She smiled, her chameleon nature changed from grave to gay, and she soon forgot the Bankes family in the excitement of railway travelling. Her thoughts were busy also as to what lucid explanation she should give Miss Wilton on her arrival at 4 Tudor Road, Notting Hill.

Let us leave her for a few minutes plunged in her maiden meditation fancy free, and peep a while into the history of her young life and the reason of her being in her present position. Her life had been like that of many other young women in the upper middle class—a life of comfortable ease and enjoyment, with the certain hope of something bright in the future, such as a fairly rich husband, etc. Until then she was destined to keep her father's house and to make herself companionable to him when he should have retired from military service abroad. She had been sent from India at an early age to be brought up in the house of her aunt, this identical Miss Wilton ; and she had looked forward to the time when she should be grown up and realise the delightful prospect of being house-mistress in the paternal abode. But, unfortunately, her dreams were rudely shattered. A year before he retired, Colonel Benson took unto himself a second wife, and on their establishing themselves in

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the old country, spoilt, indulged Meta found that living with her stepmother was an impossibility. She hated her, and the feeling was reciprocated with interest. A battle royal ensued; complaints many and grievous were carried to her father by the step-dame, and Meta one day in a passion ran away without notice to Miss Wilton's house, declaring she would not live with such a virago—that her home was a perfect hell upon earth. At first Colonel Benson was disposed to sympathise with his daughter, but as he found this impracticable for a peaceful married life, he veered suddenly, and in a towering passion, equal to his daughter's, gave Meta her choice—either she was to submit to her stepmother, or earn her own living as best she could. *He* would not encourage such insubordination.

India had not improved his temper; it had made him hot and peppery: it required but small provocation to throw him into one of his "tempests," as naughty Meta phrased it, and he greatly wished for domestic peace and comfort after the long spell of service he had passed in the Neilgherry Hills. Influenced by his lady, a hard, selfish, irritable and under-bred sort of woman, Colonel Benson refused even to give his daughter an allowance, and as her aunt's income was too small to enable her to keep Meta without the £100 a year which she had received when the Colonel was abroad, the girl gladly put her shoulder to the wheel and plunged into governing as the only way out of the difficulty.

For three years she had been "doing it." Her first essay was fortunate: she kept it for two years and then the family went to Egypt, and she was left lamenting. Then followed a constant round of changes, when nearly every month found her on the eve of leaving for pastures new, until Meta grew perfectly sick, and began to think she would never again meet with nice people or a permanent engagement. After these varieties and uncomfortable experiences, she found herself a resident governess with the Bankes, and felt sure whilst she was

An Unwelcome Visitor

there that she was to be lucky after all. As we have seen, three months again saw her thrown on her own resources. The secret of it all was this—she was far too good-looking, too high-spirited, too fond of her own pleasure and convenience, too impulsive and untrained for the depressing and self-repressing position of a dependent. It would have been better for her if she had kept her temper and put up with her stepmother—for the freedom of home life was the only thing she was fitted for. But her pride however forbade it. What? go back again after the shameful treatment she had experienced from that vulgar, ill-bred creature, her father's wife! No, rather than submit she would not even ask for help. She was bitter and vindictive against both, even more so against her father, since he unjustly refused to allow her any benefit from the income of the money that was left to her by her mother—the capital of which was to be handed to her on the day of her wedding (provided she married with her father's consent). He had undisputed control, however, over both capital and income as long as she remained single.

CHAPTER III

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

WHEN Miss Wilton received Meta's letter that morning, she was to say the least of it very angry. She read it twice over; each time with increasing discontent. Her consternation chiefly lay in the fact that all her bedrooms were occupied, and she was then entertaining her usual number of paying guests.

Where then was she to put up this troublesome niece, who was always cropping up in the most unreasonable and unseasonable way? The only accommodation she could think of was the box-room at the top of the house. There was sufficient space in that receptacle for a tiny chair-bed-

A Woman at Bay

stead and a make-shift washstand and dressing-table. If Meta was not satisfied with this she must go elsewhere for board-residence. So concluded Miss Wilton as she busied herself that morning in the preparation of this disused attic. Her niece did not arrive until nearly five o'clock, and she was still busy putting up cheap lace curtains in the box-room when she heard the cab stop at the door, and peeping out of the window saw Meta emerge, looking very tired and blue with the cold and long journey. The housemaid was quite some time before she answered the ring, and Miss Wilton went to the top of the landing to hear the directions given about the luggage.

"Tell the cabman to bring my boxes in," she heard Meta say.

An altercation then ensued; the cabman refused point blank to leave his horse.

"You don't expect me to bring in this 'ere luggage," said he, gruffly. "I ain't a porter, and it ain't my job. My fare is four-and-sixpence."

"Perhaps," returned Meta angrily, "you will kindly let me have my boxes before you ask for your fare. The distance from Euston Station to this house is four miles, so how can you dare expect more than half-a-crown?"

She spoke imperiously, and the tone of her voice roused the cabby's bad temper.

"It ain't the likes of you to dictate to me what my fare is, especially as you know nothing about distances," was his insolent reply.

This unpleasantness naturally brought about a small crowd of spectators. No one who has lived in London need fear much difficulty in attracting his neighbour's curiosity. You have but to slap a friend on the back, and wish him at Jericho, and you are immediately surrounded by interested onlookers, who think, no doubt, that you have been doing it for their amusement.

Amongst the crowd appeared a man all streaming with perspiration, and crimson with the exertion of

An Unwelcome Visitor

running a mile in order to get a porter's job. He touched his forelock to Meta and volunteered to carry the luggage in for sixpence. Meta complied, and a policeman then appearing, induced the cabman to think differently of his exorbitant request, for he took the half-a-crown handed him by the housemaid with a fervent hope expressed aloud that he had no wish to see "that young woman again, or the likes of her" (indicating Meta).

"Where is the porter carrying my luggage to?" she asked, as she ascended the stairs, the servant following.

"To the box-room, miss. Miss Wilton is up there now."

Meta heard her aunt exclaiming to the porter, as he bumped the large Saratoga trunk with a mighty thud on the carpetless floor, and a minute after she found herself face to face with her kinswoman.

Miss Wilton was short and insignificant-looking, but she summoned all the small dignity she was possessed of in order to impress her refractory niece. For in her opinion Meta had behaved unworthily.

"My dear," said she, lifting her face to receive the girl's kiss, "I am glad to see you, only I should have liked longer notice to get things ready. The house is full, Meta," she added, as she saw the discontented expression of the other, "and I am really making shift to receive you."

Meta bit her lips, and suppressed her vexation and disgust until the porter and maid had left the room.

"Am I to sleep here?" she presently asked, as she looked round the piles of trunks and bags (belonging to other people, of course) arranged carefully near the walls so as to make as much space as possible for the chair-bedstead, and within reach of it a rickety little table which stood for washstand as well as dressing-table combined. Over the basin on the wall Miss Wilton had hung up a cracked smoked looking-glass

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which had once been a drawing-room mirror : shreds of matting here and there concealed the bareness of the floor ; the two poky little windows were draped with muslin curtains and there were one or two chairs and a very old disused couch which had been consigned to the box-room years ago when Meta was a child, and on which she had had many a romp with her dolls. Miss Wilton had draped this shabby bit of furniture with some pretty cretonne, and the mantelpiece was likewise covered, so that the room on the whole did not look quite so disreputable as it might have done. But Meta's strongest objections to it lay in the low, sloping ceiling against which she could knock her head at any hour of the day, thoughtlessly forgetting the lowliness that would be necessary on all occasions when she entered this humble apartment.

"There is nowhere else, Meta," replied Miss Wilton, querulously. "I could not possibly turn the servants out of their room, and the three spare bedrooms are occupied." Then before her niece could remonstrate again, she remembered all at once the inconvenience she had been put to through this unforeseen invasion, and her own private suspicions as to the reason of it. "What on earth," she added in a sharp tone that Meta knew well, "possessed you to leave the Bankes' without notice? Were they not satisfied with you? You will become quite a notorious character if you continue changing your situation every month or so in this disgraceful manner."

"Why disgraceful?" repeated Meta, flinging her hat and gloves on the bed, and getting ready for a battle of words. "You surely don't expect me to stop anywhere after I have been insulted? It is Mrs Bankes who behaved disgracefully, and not I."

"But she must have had some reason for complaining, for jealousy! I have always warned you about your manners towards the male sex," said Miss Wilton, cautiously.

An Unwelcome Visitor

"She had no reason at all," returned Meta, angrily. "My greatest fault in her eyes was my superior good looks. Major Bankes was civil and nothing more. Perhaps occasionally he resented her unnecessary slights to me, and lectured her privately on her want of good manners. But I never flirted with him; of that I am quite sure. Has she written to you? She said she would."

"I have received no communication from Mrs Major Bankes," said Miss Wilton, with dignity.

"Well, you will receive one in course of time," reassured Meta, glancing at herself in the cracked mirror, which instantly sent forth a distorted, smoky reflection of her face, and unwittingly roused her to increasing ill-humour.

"If I had known that you would be so full up," she resumed, "I should have gone to a boarding-house rather than inconvenience you. Dad would then have to pay whether he cared to do so or not. I have a good mind to run up bills purposely so that he may have this bother. His wife then would have to go with less dress and luxuries, and it would serve them both right. I believe a man is bound to support his daughter when he can, and I have been a great fool to let him off so easily. For the future, I shall know better."

"My dear Meta!" exclaimed Miss Wilton, shocked beyond expression to hear such a wicked speech. "You really must control your feelings. You must remember that it is entirely your own fault that you are not now in possession of a comfortable home."

"Comfortable home indeed!" said the girl, contemptuously. "It was a perfect pandemonium with that horrid woman nagging at me every hour of the day, and making mischief whenever she could. I thought you always sided with me in this? It is the first time I ever heard you say that I had lost a comfortable home through my refusing to keep the

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peace with my stepmother." She burst into tears of vexation, anger and passion.

Her reception had been a series of annoyances from the beginning. Firstly the dispute with the cabman, then the sight of the box-room, the cracked mirror, her aunt's coldness, and lastly this unjust accusation was the climax, and Meta wept with childish rage to think that she should be called upon to suffer these humiliations.

Her tears had the effect of softening Miss Wilton's asperity.

"Don't cry, Meta," she said, consolingly, as she kissed the girl. "I will try my best to make you as comfortable as I can. I am only sorry that I have not a better room to give you. And now, my dear, since there is no help for it, let me remind you again how necessary it is for you to be agreeable to my guests; I know you do not like them because they are elderly spinsters, and not very congenial company for you, but you can help me in many way by being pleasant to them whilst you are here. You know I took great pains to inculcate on you the habits of good breeding; and graceful tact is an accomplishment which very few women seem to possess. There is so much *gaucherie* in this dreadful nineteenth century. I suppose it is all the pressure we are put to with the constantly running after trains and omnibuses."

"And after unprofitable situations," put in Meta, spitefully. "When a woman has to work for her own living she loses that air of high-breeding and graceful tact which can only be sustained by ease, comfort and elegant surroundings." (Here a contemptuous glance round the box-room favoured Miss Wilton.) "A hot-house flower won't thrive in a slum," she continued, "and a common daisy or buttercup would probably die in a hot-house. You can't expect me to be as elegant and reposeful in my manner as if I had nothing so mean in my mind as looking after a governess's situa-

A Welcome Letter

tion. Of course circumstances alter cases. The very fact of my having to pass day after day with a lot of noisy ill-bred children is enough to deteriorate my moral condition. I hate my life altogether, and it is a mistake for me ever to have been born," she concluded with passionate unreasonableness.

"My dear," said Miss Wilton, mildly, "you forget your Catechism!"

"I don't want to remember it. It does not teach my neighbours to treat me properly, and there is no earthly reason why I should behave better to my neighbours because the Catechism bids me do so. The man who drew up the Catechism, I daresay, was a canting hypocrite, and did not realise what he was about."

It would be difficult to describe Miss Wilton's countenance as she listened. She wondered if Meta was *quite* in her right mind? She considered the possibility of her niece expressing such opinions in the presence of her paying guests. It would never, never do, she thought.

"You will be so good, Meta," said she, severely, "to refrain from such unladylike expressions whilst you are in my house. Please to remember that you have brought your present position on yourself, and as I see no immediate change for the better, it would be wiser for you to subdue your temper and entertain some regard for the feelings of others. I will leave you now to get ready for dinner. I trust when I do see you again, you will be in a more composed frame of mind." So saying Miss Wilton left her, and poor Meta was not at all sorry to be left alone.

CHAPTER IV

A WELCOME LETTER

THE postman's knock is always a welcome sound to most people; it has an excitement, a pleasure all its own; but

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to Meta it betokened care and anxiety. She felt sure her aunt would receive the threatened letter from Mrs Banks, which would naturally increase Miss Wilton's displeasure, and perhaps she would communicate with Colonel Benson; for Miss Wilton could act very unpleasantly when so inclined.

Meta felt guilty when she thought of the money she had received from Major Banks, and wondered if his wife was aware of it. Yet in her inmost heart she was sure that she had done right in accepting it, since it had been given her out of a pure sense of justice on the Major's part.

A wandering glance round the box-room and its unpleasant environments roused her into energy; she must act and act quickly in order to get away from Tudor Road; anything almost would be better than this. There was bitterness in the thought of her dependence, and there was also a hidden resolve never to put herself in her aunt's way again.

When she greeted that lady at the breakfast table she inquired if Mrs Banks had written.

"No, my dear, I have received no letter," replied Miss Wilton graciously. Then in a lower tone she added, "Do not trouble yourself about that, Meta. I should take no notice of what she said, even if she had written."

Miss Wilton intended to be kind; she saw how pale and worried the girl looked and felt sorry for her. Meta had greatly pleased her the previous evening by playing and singing to the three paying guests, and had made herself generally charming; and Miss Wilton had been told that this high-spirited niece was quite a pleasant acquisition to the house, so that she felt thoroughly amiable again with her, and resolved to pay no heed to any disparaging disclosure made by Mrs Banks.

After breakfast Meta set herself to reading up the advertisement sheets of the several London "dailies" that Miss Wilton and her guests took every morning,

A Welcome Letter

and this business occupied a good deal of her time. She seldom read a newspaper if she could possibly help it, and when she did read it, it was generally the columns marked "Situations Vacant." The rest of the paper had no interest for her.

She wrote several letters that morning in reply to the apparently suitable advertisements that met her eyes, and then she wrote out several copies of her own advertisement, which she posted to the various offices in the Strand for insertion in next day's issues.

This was her life for many weeks from that day ; I should not like to weary any one with a minute account of all her disappointments, her failures and the many humiliating experiences she underwent day after day, as she trudged about, interviewing first this lady and then that lady, and then returning home no nearer to her object than when she had at first started. The cause of her failure was this—she could not give the name of her last employer as a referee, and therefore her interviews were fruitless.

"Your appearance is much against you," said one stout lady to her on a similar occasion. "I feel sure you are unfit for the responsible position of a teacher to young children." This settled the matter of course, and Meta went away, feeling very much inclined to box the good lady's ears, and to deplore her fate in general.

One morning, about six weeks after her arrival at 4 Tudor Road, when she was almost on the eve of despairing, she was agreeably surprised to find a letter had come for her in answer to a recent very attractive advertisement she had drawn up and caused to be inserted in *The Morning Post*. Meta opened it and read the following,—

"Mr and Mrs James Balfour are desirous of meeting a young lady as governess-companion to their only daughter, aged seven. They have seen Miss Benson's advertisement, and would be glad if she would call

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about twelve to-morrow morning, and full particulars could be entered into.

“THE HOMESTEAD,
EPPING, ESSEX.
2nd March 18—.”

“The usual thing,” said Meta to herself, as she read it twice over. “I daresay when I go there I shall find it unsuitable, or, they will refuse to have me for some silly reason or other.”

She however replied to it, saying she would be happy to keep the appointment at the hour stated.

Early the next day she took the bus to Liverpool Street Station and purchased a ticket for Epping. She travelled third-class, and found an empty carriage, which she fervently hoped to retain to herself until the end of her short journey. She was doomed to disappointment however: just as the train was starting, the door of her compartment was opened in haste by a porter, who with some fuss and commotion bundled in a gentleman, saying, “Here you are, sir, here you are,” and to her surprise she saw that her travelling companion was no other than Major Bankes.

“By Jove!” breathed that gentleman audibly, “the idiot has put me into a beastly third-class.” He cast a look of disgust at the shabby upholstery and dirty floor of the carriage, then he looked at Meta with an air of astonishment which immediately changed into that of delight as he recognised her.

“Miss Benson!” he exclaimed, and politely raised his hat.

Meta bent forward with the utmost self-possession and shook hands with him.

“How do you do?” said she. “I am glad to see you.”

“What luck!” said Major Bankes effusively. “I had no idea such a pleasure was in store for me. I hope I see you well, Miss Benson?”

“Very well, thank you,” she replied with heightened

A Welcome Letter

colour as she remembered the incident in the fog six weeks ago and her unfriendly departure from his house.

"A stupid question to ask," interpolated the Major, staring at her more than was necessary. "A look would be a sufficient answer. You are still with your aunt, I suppose? or, have you met with another appointment? I want to tell you," he went on, without waiting for an answer, "how sorry I was at the way you had to leave us. I daren't put in an appearance for the life of me. There was no end of a rumpus the night before, and my wife was in hysterics and I don't know what not. It seemed she had heard from the servants some nonsense or other, and she was in an awful rage with me and with everybody else. She had written two letters, one addressed to your aunt, and the other to your father, giving you a dreadful character, and threatening to make the whole affair public. But I stepped in in time, and told her pretty plain that such a proceeding would amount to a libel, and unless she wished to break the partnership with me, she must not send either of the letters, as you were not likely to trouble her again when once you had left."

Meta felt grateful to him for his timely interference, and said so, timidly enough. After all, this blunt officer, with his good heart and thoughtless ways, had done her an inestimable service, and she felt more beholden to him than ever. She thanked him gracefully, and then adroitly changed the subject by giving him an amusing account of her experiences whilst seeking an appointment.

"You asked me if I have been fortunate in getting another berth since. I am still on the look-out, and am even now on my way to an interview in the country."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Major, "what a time you must have had of it. But, I say, Miss Benson, your father must be an awful brute to neglect you as he does. I can't understand it. Any sensible man ought to be

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proud to own you for a daughter." He broke off as abruptly as he had begun, and feared he had made a mistake.

She did not seem offended, however; on the contrary, she laughed, a somewhat bitter laugh.

"He is an officer like yourself," she replied after a short silence. "He is supposed to be a gentleman and to act like one. But my stepmother is not a woman who would improve the character of any man, and my father has his faults. I have offended them both, and I have no wish for a reconciliation."

"Well," said the Major, complacently, "if there is anything I can do for you, pray command me. The Royal Artillery happily owns officers who are ready to serve pretty women in distress, and I am one of them."

He doffed his hat as he spoke, and Meta laughed this time her merry laugh without a tinge of bitterness in it.

"The Royal Artillery is more favoured than the 10th Hussars," said she, "which regiment owns an officer who thinks nothing of having his only daughter at the world's mercy. But we will let that be. There is a favour I want to ask you, Major Bankes. I wonder if it would be in your power to do it for me?"

"What is it?" he asked eagerly. "I promise to be your humble servant to the best of my ability."

"It is this," said Meta boldly. "Your wife, when she gave me notice to leave, positively refused to give me any sort of reference, and I am always asked for this wherever I go for an interview, as it was my last engagement. My failing to name Mrs Bankes as a referee has been the means of preventing me from closing with several very good appointments. I wonder now if you could persuade her to change her mind? For you know I did try to give satisfaction whilst I was with you, and the children liked me on the whole."

"And the children's father too liked and admired you more than he cares to confess," hastily rejoined the

A Friendly Offer

Major in his blunt way. "And as for the reference, by Jove! I shall manage it for you! You will have the best that ever was penned. When you want one, just send a line to me at the Army and Navy Club, Pall Mall, and I shall see about it."

"But they will want to write direct to your wife?" said Meta, pleased with this ready acquiescence to her wishes, but puzzled to know how the thing could be managed without Mrs Bankes's interference.

"What if they do? I generally have the handling of the post-bag every morning, and if you will send me a line and tell me when to expect a certain letter with a certain postmark, I shall manage it all right enough."

"I shall be asked for a reference this morning. In that case I shall give your wife's name. This is Mrs Balfour's handwriting." And she showed him the note she had received.

The Major took it and examined it.

"I shall remember," said he, "and as I shall be returning home this evening, you will write direct to the Manor House."

The train stopped that moment at Loughton Station. "I am sorry to have to leave you," he added hastily, "but I am booked here. Good-bye; remember, whatever happens I am at your service."

He jumped out and waved his hat to her in parting.

CHAPTER V

A FRIENDLY OFFER

"How far is The Homestead from here?" she asked of a porter at Epping Station.

The man was bustling about with some luggage on the platform.

"The Homestead?" he repeated, as if he had not

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heard aright. "Why, five miles or more across the forest—the other side of High Beech."

"And where is High Beech?" asked Meta, aghast.

"The other side of the forest," reiterated the man, and he turned to his luggage to avoid further questioning.

"Whatever shall I do!" exclaimed Meta to herself. "It is eleven o'clock now and I could not possibly walk five miles across country fields in an hour. I should be in such a muddy state by the time I arrived."

She walked aimlessly to the gateway that led from the station with some hazy intention of engaging a fly.

There were only two vehicles outside the stand: one a low dogcart, with a plain liveried groom seated in the rear holding the reins, and apparently waiting for someone. The other was a miserable, ramshackle-looking cab, with the driver fast asleep inside. The horse was a wretched specimen of his kind, and very reluctantly Meta commenced to wake up the sleeping Jehu.

"What will you charge to drive me to The Homestead?" she asked.

She had to repeat her question twice, and to speak very loud before she received a reply.

The man scratched his head, shook off his drowsiness, and contemplated his fare abstractedly.

"Ten shillings," he replied after a long pause.

"Couldn't think of it," said Meta, despairingly.

"Seven-and-sixpence then, lady," said cabby, persuasively. "Come, that's a bargain," and he prepared to jump on the box.

Meta looked at the half-starved horse, and then glanced inside the dusty, musty interior of the vehicle, smelling of dirty straw and the horrible shag the man had evidently been smoking before falling asleep. She shook her head with a crestfallen air; she could not afford such an expensive drive, and she certainly did not care to take it in such a plague-stricken turn-out.

"No, thank you," she replied civilly. "I think I shall walk it." Then she asked her way, and the man

A Friendly Offer

directed her ungraciously enough. As she listened, her attention was drawn to the low, comfortable dogcart, which a very tall, grave man in the garb of a cleric was in the act of mounting. Meta turned away with a sigh, and picking up her skirts resolutely walked apace in order to lose no time. The roads were heavy with mud. She thought with disgust of the state she would be in by the time she reached her destination. Her temper rose on the occasion; she anathematised the Balfours for not sending a conveyance to meet her, and felt that they were disagreeable, thoughtless people, who were above considering such nondescripts as governesses and dependants. The idea filled her with bitterness: she was on the point of relinquishing the impossible five miles' walk and returning to the station when the rattle of wheels behind her made her think differently.

"It is the dogcart," she thought, "with the lucky parson in it. Ah, well, every dog has his day! Who knows but I too may have a dogcart to drive in some day?"

She had no sooner thought out these words when behold, the horse was pulled up right beside her, and looking up she saw the "lucky parson" rise from his seat, and raising his hat politely commenced to address her.

"Will you forgive this liberty," said he, in a remarkably sweet-toned voice, "but I could not help hearing your difficulty about the fly. I am myself driving past The Homestead, where I think you wish to go, and shall be most happy to offer you a seat in my cart."

Meta's face turned rosy-red with delight; all her temper vanished at the sound of that sweet voice. "Oh, thank you," said she, prettily, "but I could not think of troubling you. You are much too kind;" and she shook her head and really looked the picture of health and beauty as she stood there with the spring sunshine beaming on her. After all, she thought, the world

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was very, very kind, in spite of the fearful odds she had to fight against sometimes.

"Pray, do not refuse," said this Reverend Don Quixote smiling, "my servant will get down to help you."

The smile did it, I think, for before Miss Meta realised the situation she found herself being assisted very nimbly by the elderly groom, and herself very comfortably seated beside the parson, who threw over her knees half of the fox-rug and pushed towards her feet a most delightful foot-warmer.

"That is due to my mother's anxious forethought for my comfort," he said, with easy grace explaining the sybarite presence of the latter. They drove away then, and he began to chat pleasantly in order to put her quite at her ease.

He introduced himself as the Vicar of High Beech, which place, he explained, was an easy distance from The Homestead. He knew the Balfours slightly; they were his parishioners, but they had only lately become residents at High Beech. Were they friends of hers he asked. Meta was very truthful; she immediately introduced herself to him and told him frankly the object of her visit to The Homestead. He seemed pleased with her candour, and told her all he knew about Mr and Mrs James Balfour and their little daughter, Winifred. But he was, however, careful not to say too much. He drew her attention now and then to lovely bits of scenery, and told her that she could not live in a prettier spot than Epping and its neighbourhood.

"We abound in rare landscapes here," said he, enthusiastically. "The forest supplies us with all we need of Nature and its beauties. I trust your visit to Mrs Balfour will be successful and that you will ultimately decide to live here."

Meta sincerely hoped so likewise, and wondered if she would ever meet the Vicar of High Beech again. She inwardly resolved, however, to compass such a desirable acquaintance should her good luck prevail with Mrs

The Homestead

Balfour and she became a resident at The Homestead.

They were now driving through a very woody lane, which led direct to a massive iron gate with a tiny lodge inside the barrier.

"Here is your destination," said Mr Falkner, and there was a suspicion of regret in his voice. "If you pull the bell-chain the lodge-keeper will open to you. Good-bye; it has been a great pleasure for me to drive you." The groom jumped down to assist her to alight.

They drove away again, and she watched them out of sight with a strange lump in her throat. She was dreading the approaching interview, and it was fully a minute before she could summon courage to ring.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOMESTEAD

AFTER a few minutes' deliberation she gave it an energetic pull, which produced as much clanging as would rouse the whole neighbourhood.

Several very fine collies came scampering down the drive, barking angrily at the intrusion. They stopped in an excited group at the gate, surveying the visitor with not unfriendly glances.

A clean tidy woman called them away as she admitted Meta with a smile and told her she was expected.

"Mistress was for sending a carriage to meet you, miss," she exclaimed cheerfully, "but she didn't know by what train you were coming. There is the station fly always ready, though. Did you come by that, miss?"

"No," replied Meta, wondering at her inquisitiveness and thinking it best to speak the truth; "a friend kindly drove me to the gate." The woman smiled again as she directed her to the house through the long woody avenue. She walked slowly along, followed by

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the dogs, who seemed to have formed a good opinion of her and overwhelmed her with their attentions. As she came in sight of the mansion she was indeed much impressed with the beauty of its park-like grounds and terraces, studded here and there with statues and fountains.

"They must be very wealthy people," she reflected, "and I hope, should they engage me, they will offer a good salary. To live in such a house one would require a lot of nice clothes, and clothes cost money. Perhaps, who knows, but I may meet my fate here. The place looks romantic enough for the foundation of a three-volume novel."

She timidly touched the electric bell on reaching the front door, hoping it would not make quite so much noise as the bell-pull at the lodge gate. A magnificent footman in livery opened to her, and when he heard her request to see Mrs Balfour told her that his mistress never saw visitors in the morning. Would Miss Balfour do?

"I have come by appointment," said Meta, with dignity. "Mrs Balfour, I think, expects me. Will you tell her, please, Miss Benson waits to see her?"

The man, she thought, evidently took her for some unimportant subscription-caller, or, worse still, a troublesome church-worker come to solicit alms for the poor. She was glad she had donned her best and most stylish attire for the interview. The navy-blue coat and skirt she wore were faultless in cut and fit, her gloves and *bottines* were of the best, and her velvet toque matched the dress. Her only fear was that she did not look so unattractive as the usual run of governesses. She wondered if Mrs Balfour would object to her "unfortunate appearance." The footman conducted her through a handsome entrance hall, up a wide staircase, and then opened the door of an apartment which to Meta seemed at first like a fairyland of delight, so replete with beautiful things was it.

The Homestead

"Miss Benson," announced the servant, softly, and as she entered he noiselessly shut the door and disappeared.

At first the intense heat of that heavily-perfumed chamber caught her breath and made her feel faint. The sensuous odour filled her with a mad desire to rush to the window and throw it open ; then the sight of its innumerable prettinesses kept her standing mute, until a voice roused her from her stupid trance—a lazy murmur of a voice scarcely raised above a whisper.

"Will you come in, please, and take a seat?"

She roused herself and realised that she had been making a fool of herself. She crossed the room and did as she was asked, wishing she did not feel quite so nervous. On a sofa, drawn near the huge fire, lay a graceful *mignonne* figure ; this was a woman of some thirty years, as fair as a lily in complexion and dark as a black tulip in her hair, eyes and eyebrows. She was faultlessly dressed in a loose white serge wrapper, and everything about her suggested laziness, chronic invalidism and superfluous ease and good-nature born of her excessive love of comfort and luxury. She regarded Meta favourably as she again spoke. "I am glad you were able to call ; my sister-in-law ought to have ordered the carriage to meet you." She motioned slightly to a lady who was seated on the other side of the fireplace, her fingers busy with some fancy crochet work—a tall, florid, buxom female, attired in a loose morning-gown, and whose contrast to the other was rather pleasant than otherwise. Adelaide Balfour's personality was suggestive of health, robust health, if nothing else. She certainly was not handsome, but she was decidedly comfortable to look at. Meta felt rather piqued at neither of them rising to receive her—but then she was only a poor governess, and Mrs and Miss Balfour were ladies of wealth and position—there was a great gulf between them. This stifling thought, added to the faintness she felt from the heavy atmosphere in

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which these fortunate women breathed, humbled her beyond endurance, and she felt very much inclined to cry as she murmured something about Mrs Balfour being very kind and thoughtful; then, before she could say more, that lady interrupted her with, "How old are you, may I ask?"

The question, put so abruptly, would have been decidedly rude if it had come from a more energetic voice, but the speaker's soft murmur of intonation made this impossible.

"I am two-and-twenty, madam," replied Meta, readily.

"What is your father's position?" was the next query. Mrs Balfour evidently had learnt off a string of questions and intended to lose no time about getting her replies to them.

Meta told her.

"Have you left home before? Where was your last engagement? Are you fond of children?" and many others of the same sort were asked one after the other, until Mrs Balfour was possessed of enough of Meta's antecedents as she cared to know; and then last, not least, came the usual—"This lady with whom you last resided, I presume will write in reply to my letter?" It was a polite way of saying that her character from the last place was absolutely necessary.

Very much emboldened by the thought of Major Banks's championship, Meta readily replied that Mrs Banks of the Manor House, Congleton, would be delighted to stand referee if Mrs Balfour wished to write.

Mrs Balfour did wish, for she bade her sister-in-law (who, during the whole of the colloquy, divided the time equally in attending to her crochet and in closely inspecting Meta's face, dress and general appearance) to make a note of the address, and then, whilst this was being done, threw herself back on the many cushions of the couch as though thoroughly exhausted with the unusual exertion she had just undergone.

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Miss Balfour, observing this, instantly took up the cue and asked Meta how soon she could come.

"As soon as you like, madam," answered the girl, looking somewhat alarmed at Mrs Balfour and wondering if she was going to faint.

But that lady suddenly roused herself by saying conclusively, as though she wished the interview to close, "The salary is £80 a year. We will fix one day next week for you to come to us, subject, of course, to a satisfactory letter from Mrs Banks. Good-day," she added graciously as Meta rose; "my sister-in-law will show you your rooms and introduce you to Winifred."

"I think," said Miss Balfour, when they were crossing the wide landing and then down a few stairs which separated the best rooms in the house from the school-room wing, "I think you will find my little niece a very interesting pupil. She is high-spirited and would require some managing; but then if she takes a fancy to you this will be easy enough."

Meta's heart quaked at this. Would the child take a fancy to her? A spoilt, only child, the offspring of wealthy, indulgent parents, would probably regard the governess as a nuisance. But Miss Balfour continued:—

"We have had several governesses for her; but Winifred did not seem to care for them, they were such stupid, tactless, under-bred women, who really had not the faintest idea of instructing and amusing the child. Therefore my sister and I agreed that we should choose this time someone young and agreeable and of good appearance, who would begin her duties by securing her affections and good graces—and then when once this is accomplished the rest would be comparatively easy. This is your schoolroom," said she, opening the door of the first of a long suite of rooms devoted to the use of the governess and her precious charge.

The apartment mentioned by Miss Balfour was a sumptuous one. Meta had never possessed such a luxurious schoolroom; the toil of teaching a trouble-

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some child, she thought, would be rendered pleasant under such cheerful circumstances. Then there was her own bedroom to be, then Winifred's playroom and bedroom, which adjoined a small dressing-room, where, Miss Balfour explained, the nurse slept. The two former rooms were furnished as if for a little princess; the playroom was replete with every imaginable toy or picture-book that can delight the heart of a seven-year-old child.

"Let us go and look for Winifred in the garden," said Miss Balfour, and they accordingly descended the schoolroom stairs, through a pretty but small landing into the terrace, which Meta noted with delight was like an old-fashioned *parterre*, bounded by a long white marble balustrade, on which, placed at equal distances, were statues of heathen gods and goddesses. A large fountain in the lower terrace was throwing up scintillating flashes of water in the spring sunshine and making a merry babbling noise in the process.

"What a very beautiful place it is," said Meta, aloud. She could not help thinking The Homestead and its charming grounds an ideal spot to live in. She hoped Major Bankes would manage all right about the reference. She had her doubts though as to its turning out successful.

"The Homestead is supposed to be the finest house in Epping and its neighbourhood," said Miss Balfour, complacently. "The forest views from the windows of the schoolroom wing are the finest in England. I do not think you will find it dull when you are here; our recreations are principally outdoor ones—picnics, garden-parties, lawn tennis, *ad libitum* in the summer. Are you a good walker, Miss Benson?"

Meta replied that she was an excellent walker and dearly loved being in the open air.

"Then you will suit Winifred," said Miss Balfour, quickly. "There is the child with her skipping-rope on the asphalt court. Winifred, Winifred, my darling!"

The Homestead

cried the devoted aunt in her fat, good-natured way, "come to me, my treasure."

The sound of their voices was considerably deadened by the barks and yelps of a noisy little King Charles puppy, who was engaged in frisking round and round the little girl whilst she was hopping through her skipping-rope. The child turned round quickly and was about to make a rush in obedience to the call when her eyes caught sight of Meta, and she stood suddenly still and stared. It was not a friendly stare; she had evidently guessed who Meta was, and why she was there, and shunned her accordingly.

A pretty little pet she looked as she stood there, her large blue eyes dilated, her long fair hair flowing down her back and round her shoulders in ringlets, and her delicate pink and white face like that of an English-rosebud set in a golden frame. She let fall the skipping-rope in dismay, and the King Charles delightedly carried it off in triumph to gnaw at it in quiet satisfaction with having at last worried her into giving it him—at least so puppy thought.

"Oh, what a beauty! what a darling!" exclaimed Meta in genuine admiration. She adored things beautiful in Nature and art, and above all she admired beauty in the human face divine when she saw it, and Winifred's assuredly was pleasant and good to look at.

Whilst she was thus taking to her future pupil, the blue eyes of the seven-year-old infant lost its expression of dismay, of possible aversion; the drooping corners of the rosy mouth opened into a smile, and spoilt Winifred showed Meta that the note of admiration was mutual. She danced up to Miss Balfour, saying saucily,—

"Is that pretty lady going to be my new governess?"

"Yes, my darling," answered the worshipping aunt. "Go and shake hands. I think you will like her."

"I like pretty-looking people," readily observed Miss Winifred as she obeyed. "And I am glad to see that

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she is not old and ugly like the others were. What is her name ? ”

This abrupt question was really put to Miss Balfour, though the child's blue eyes were fixed all the time on Meta, who determined there and then to seize this opportunity of winning the little girl's affections as she came up to her, and kneeling down she put her arms round her, saying, in her prettiest voice,—

“My name is Meta Benson, darling. Do you think you will try and love me just a little when I come to live with you ? ”

“Meta Benson,” said Winifred, thoughtfully, regarding the beautiful girlish face so near her own. “Meta Benson,” she repeated conclusively, “I think you and I will be friends. My name is Winifred Balfour,” and with the dignity of a little princess this interesting atom of humanity imprinted a stately kiss on Miss Benson's cheek.

CHAPTER VII

SOME INTERESTING CORRESPONDENCE

THEY made a pretty picture.

Such was the inward comment expressed by the gentleman who was coming up the garden path.

Winifred was the first to observe this newcomer. She ran up to him, crying, “Papa, papa, this is my new governess ! Let me introduce you ; ” and, with the air of a grown-up woman, she began, “Mr Balfour—Miss Benson.”

Meta was so taken by surprise by this sudden movement that she met the introduction rather awkwardly. But Mr Balfour smiled and bowed. He was a man not given to awkwardness : self-possession pervaded the air he breathed. Perhaps his survey of the young lady was a trifle bold, but it clearly expressed approval.

Some Interesting Correspondence

"Miss Benson is just on the eve of departure," began Miss Balfour with a meaning look at her brother. "We hope to see her for good one day next week."

"I am very glad to hear it," said he, bowing again, "and I trust Miss Benson will find a happy, congenial home with us. We will do our best to make it a pleasant one. But surely you are not going back without partaking of some lunch first?" His thoughtfulness pleased Meta. He glanced at his sister, who hastily seconded the invitation, and accordingly carried off Meta to the house and to the dining-room, where cake and wine were put before her. Whilst Meta was thankfully availing herself of this much-needed refreshment, in rushed little Winifred, her face all flushed with pleasure.

"I am going to drive you to the station in my own pony-carriage," she cried; "you will then see what a capital whip I am. I have got the dearest and most obedient little pony in the world!" And she flew off without waiting for a reply, leaving Meta to think her the queerest piece of contradiction imaginable.

Soon she returned, looking like a little princess in her sealskin pelisse and tam-o'-shanter, with the daintiest bit of a whip in her hand. Mr Balfour then entered and explained to Meta that she need have no nervous fears about Winifred's driving, as she really was an expert in the art. He was most polite, and delighted the girl by condescending to see her to the carriage—a sweet little turn-out drawn by a spirited pony, who, with the air of an indulged pet, shook the bells with which his neck was adorned, when Winifred patted him on the nose, bidding him "behave his best, and not show off any of his pranks to shock her new governess." An elderly woman (Winifred's nurse) already occupied the back seat, Meta and her small driver sat in the front, and a tiger in splendid livery was prepared to take the vacant seat beside the nurse when they started. Winifred indeed drove in brilliant style down the long

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drive, past the lodge-gate, and through that long and woody lane in the forest on their way to the station.

She conversed pleasantly the while, telling Meta all her favourite pursuits, her numerous pets, and the fun they would have together when Meta came to live at Epping. They arrived at the sleepy old country station in time for the up train, and Winifred alighted to see her off. This embarrassed Meta somewhat, for she did not care that the child and her nurse should see her get into a third-class compartment. So to avoid complications the girl went straight to the booking-office and purchased a first-class single.

Miss Wilton was greatly surprised when she heard a full account of this agreeable day, and thought Mrs Balfour a remarkably amiable Christian to dispense with the necessary reference. Meta said nothing of her encounter with Major Bankes, nor did she correct her aunt about the reference ; but her first act on reaching her attic was to send him the following note :—

“DEAR MAJOR BANKES,—Mrs Balfour has practically engaged me, subject, of course, to the letter from your wife being satisfactory. You will remember your promise and write in reply to her letter. My kind regards.—Yours very sincerely,
M. B.”

The next day but one she received the following reply :—

“DEAR MISS BENSON,—Your note reached me simultaneously with one from Mrs Balfour. I have replied to it as promised. My wife suspects nothing. I enclose you a faithful copy of your character, which I consider the most charming in the world. Allow me always to be of use to you, and let me remain ever your sincere friend and well-wisher,
JOHN BANKES.”

Meta discreetly destroyed this documentary evidence,

Some Interesting Correspondence

and turned her attention to the enclosure. She read the following :—

“Major and Mrs Banks have great pleasure in recommending Miss Meta Benson as governess. She held that position in their household and gave every satisfaction. Miss Benson is charming and accomplished, a finished performer (piano and violin), sings well, and is the daughter of a distinguished officer of the 10th Hussars.

“They can conscientiously assure Mr and Mrs James Balfour of her entire competence to teach and supervise the bringing-up of their daughter.

“THE MANOR HOUSE,
CONGLETON, CHESHIRE.
19th March 18—.”

“Well,” said Meta with a delighted chuckle, “that is satisfactory ; and, John Banks, you are a brick !”

END OF BOOK I.

BOOK II

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CHAPTER VIII

THINK OF THE DEVIL AND HE IS SURE TO APPEAR

IT was the beginning of the season in London. The whole world was gay and festive, the world of rank and wealth, the world of men and women who regard life but ill spent if they are not whirled in the vortex of pleasure and labour combined. It is hard work, this getting through a London season. No wonder so much paint and powder are necessary to conceal the weariness which stamps its fingers and toes under the eyes of so many of the poor city belles. But there is a respite—pleasant one—which breaks in the day and gives the poor toilers of Society time to breathe and think. And this respite is the diurnal driving up and down the Lady's Mile, when the Hyde Park air can be taken without injury to the complexion or trial to the social temperament. Everybody nearly bows to everybody that is anybody at all, and the smiles, and the nods, the raising of hats, the display of bonnets, the pretty dresses, the smart livery of the attendant servants, the sunshine, the glitter, the laughter, the fun, the pleasurable excitement pervading the atmosphere, render the Park a paradise, a garden of Eden. And into this Eden entered a serpent, through a side gate from Rotten Row, and passed slowly up the long walk, keeping as nearly under the trees as possible. Occasionally he cast sour glances of disapproval at the gay and happy throng, and hated them with unreasonable hate, because they at least seemed happy, whilst he was inwardly chewing the cud of a great and bitter wrong, and on his mein could be seen the sign-

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manual of a deep abiding wretchedness. This serpent was in human shape, a man of rank, a man of wealth, and one respected by his class. His reason for skulking under the shadow of the trees was to avoid observation, to elude the necessity of saluting ladies and gentlemen of his acquaintance who might catch sight of him and thus claim his attention. He was not sociable, as you will remark, and his heart was heavy within him because he had been balked of his dearest wish. He, the spoilt son of Fortune, had actually for the first time in his life met with opposition, and the result was fatal to his nature—his weak, pampered nature, which kicked rebelliously against the prick of this unusual experience.

He was strolling along under the trees, his head thoughtfully lowered and his eyes cast on the ground, when suddenly his reflections, whatever they were, were brought to a standstill, and the very thing he dreaded and wished to avoid happened. He heard his name called aloud in a voice that defied a cut, and he was compelled to notice.

“Hullo, Rowland, how are you, old man?” It was a pleasant well-bred shout and nothing more.

The speaker left his seat on the other side of the turf and came up to our serpent, whose reluctant hand he shook very heartily.

“I am very glad to have met you,” said this intruder, courteously. “In short, I was just thinking of calling at your house when I caught sight of your Mephistophelian countenance.”

“Think of the devil, he is sure to appear,” growled rather than said the serpent.

“That is a correct version, I believe, where you are concerned,” returned his acquaintance, with a bow so grand, so theatrically accomplished, and with such preternatural gravity on his beautiful animal face that the serpent’s own unamiable one cleared and he laughed—a bitter laugh, but it helped to clear the atmosphere in spite of its bitterness.

Think of the Devil

"Didn't know you were up in town to-day," he condescended to say in a more agreeable tone of voice.

"Didn't know it myself till I came here."

They seated themselves under a large elm tree and prepared to talk. Our serpent produced his cigar-case, offered one to his friend, and they smoked the weed of peace together, and their tongues loosened.

"I was down in the depths when you called to me," commenced Rowland, as though imparting extraordinary news.

"You looked it," said the other, laconically.

"But, by Jove, Balfour, a man can't stand this sort of thing long! She is playing old Nick with my name."

"Let her; it amuses her, and it doesn't do you any harm."

"You know you are not speaking sincerely, Balfour. If it was your wife, now, you would advise differently."

"My dear fellow, I only wish my wife had half the spirit of yours; she is a doll—and a very lazy one at that. It is I who should be seeking a divorce, and not you."

Rowland the serpent puffed away at his cigar for one whole minute before he answered. "A doll is not so bad as a ——!" he remarked.

"That may be," replied Mr Balfour. "But remember this, you may rid yourself of the one but cannot of the other. The law has no compensation for dolls and nonentities. They plague you until death comes in to interfere. Now, if my apology for a wife acted like yours I should find no difficulty in obtaining a *decree nisi*."

"How would you manage it?"

"I should stump up facts and force truth out of lies. But I have no such luck!" and he looked the picture of discontent.

"Come, Balfour, your case is not so bad as mine. Although your wife is a nonentity and all that, still

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your marriage is lucky, since it has made you Winifred's father. By-the-way, how is my god-daughter?"

"She was inquiring after you the other day, and wanted to know when you intended visiting The Homestead again. We have got the most ripping specimen of a *gouvernante* for her now—a deuced pretty woman, unengaged, and almost as unsophisticated under the circumstances as can be expected."

"A pretty governess is not the wisest thing to have in the house with such a man as you in it," said Rowland, sapiently.

They both laughed, as though this was a good joke, and Balfour continued his say with a chuckle. "She is spiky, if that is what you mean. Winifred has taken a marvellous fancy to her, and is quite docile under her management."

Rowland made no reply; his thoughts went wool-gathering."

Balfour, noticing this, let him alone for the space of a minute or two, then said,—

"To return to your wife and the divorce case pending, Rowland, don't you think it would be a good thing to let the matter rest for a while until you can get more substantial proofs of her infidelity?"

"No," said Rowland, bitterly; "every day seems a century to me. I shall not rest easy in my bed until I am a free man again. That she is unfaithful, and has been unfaithful, is true as Holy Writ. Why should she be living at my expense and flinging away my money on this wretched, paltry beggar she is enamoured with longer than is needful? No; before coming here I went straight and had a long interview with Messrs Gorham, my solicitors, and they both assure me that they will do all they can to expedite matters. The affair also is in the hands of an experienced detective, who watches all her movements like a very Cerberus. I am bound to get a divorce soon." And he ground his teeth with rage when he remembered the recent

Think of the Devil

disappointing information he had received from his solicitors—that there was not sufficient evidence in their hands for a successful case, but that they hoped, by dint of detectives, etc., to glean sufficient proofs in course of time.

“Well,” said his friend, complacently, “suppose you come down and stop a week with us until the case is on? This constant brooding over your wrongs is playing the mischief with your good looks. Come down and make acquaintance with this governess of ours. She is amusing, and who knows but Fate may console you after all.”

“Never fear, Balfour ; when once I am free I shall stick to my freedom. No woman will ever succeed in wiling me again into the matrimonial noose.”

“My dear fellow, I never hinted at matrimony, did I? That was your virtuous idea, not mine. I only invited you to The Homestead; for a week, for two weeks, or for as many weeks as you like. Will you come?”

The cordial invitation ended with a pleasant smile, which Rowland could not resist, for after a little demur he complied with good grace, explaining away his apparent reluctance by the fact of his wishing to be in town just then in order to hurry on the case at the lawyers, but since his friend Balfour was so pressing he would come, hoping that matters there would not be delayed by his absence, etc. Balfour hoped so too, and accorded his sympathy with well-feigned sincerity.

Thus they sat on for another hour or so, smoking and talking, until Rowland rose to go, saying he had an appointment to keep at six o'clock ; Balfour said the same, and that it was time to see about it.

“When are we to expect you at The Homestead?” he asked, rising from his chair and shaking off one or two caterpillars that had fallen on his coat from the tree. “Come any day or hour you like. Winifred, I know, will be transported when she hears you are expected.”

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Rowland's dark, gloomy face lighted up. He had a soft corner in his used-up heart for that bright piece of precocity, and he secretly envied his friend Balfour the possession of such a daughter.

“Yes,” he replied, “he would come to-morrow, or the next day, or the day after ; at anyrate, he would be sure to turn up, bag and baggage and all, and when he did come he would probably make a long business of it.”

Balfour laughed his quiet, well-bred laugh, and they parted the best of friends.

CHAPTER IX

HUSBAND AND WIFE

THE engagement that separated the Honourable John Hamilton Rowland (commonly called Jack Rowland) from his friend was a truly innocent one. He had faithfully promised to meet La Belle Marguerite of the Canterbury Music Hall at six o'clock precisely, and as the lady was amusing and pretty, and an immense favourite into the bargain, he had some intention of taking her out to dine at the Star and Garter, Richmond, where he would treat her to a champagne dinner, and they would thoroughly enjoy themselves and forget dull care. Therefore this honourable gentleman, who was burning to get a divorce from his wife because he suspected her to be unfaithful to him, thought nothing of his own glaring infidelities, which, weighed in the balance, far outweighed those of hers. What he did was considered correct and even allowable ; he was a man, and men were socially permitted so much more scope for evil-doing ; a woman was necessarily restricted and under Virtue's obligation. This was his opinion and the opinion of many men like him ; and he acted up to this opinion with his usual sagacity and self-indulgence. On leaving Balfour he hailed

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the first hansom he saw at the Park gate, and desired to be driven to his house in Kensington Palace Gardens. A brougham stood inside the gateway when he arrived.

"Anyone called?" he asked of one of the many liveried footmen who, with obsequious fussiness, hastened forward on his arrival.

The marble entrance-hall was lighted up although it was only dusk as yet.

A stately butler handed his master a small gold salver, on which lay several pieces of pasteboard, the result of useless calls. Rowland examined them one by one and seemed glad that he had not been at home to any of them. He smiled a grim smile, turned away, and was about to mount the staircase, when his attention was drawn to the servant saying,—

"If you please, sir, the library is occupied." If he had said "The House was sitting," meaning, of course, the Houses of Parliament, he could not have thrown more meaning into his voice—more terror or more awe of possible consequences.

"Well!" interpolated Rowland with dignity.

"The Honourable Mrs Rowland called and said she would not be denied, and she is in the library now," stammered the butler. "In short, sir," he went on, as though trying to exonerate himself and his fellow-servants from all blame in the matter, "she said you had made the appointment with her."

A great rage possessed the soul of Jack Rowland. He had expressly forbidden every servant in his employ to admit their former mistress into that house under any circumstances whatever; but she had prevailed by the force of finesse and a lie.

Disobedience was an unpardonable crime, and this was flagrant disobedience of his express commands. His eyes flashed fire and he absolutely shook with passion. The butler and footmen knew well from experience the violent tornadoes of rage he was subject to, and each man felt that this was the last day of their service in that splendid

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mansion ; they would be dismissed there and then without a character, and it was fatal.

But Providence is merciful, and Providence interposed in the shape of a woman.

Just as Rowland was about to speak in all the concentrated wrath he was possessed of, the library door near the staircase was thrown open and a tall, magnificently-dressed lady appeared in the doorway. She was really a handsome creature, but she was pale as a statue. She looked so white, her blue eyes had such a fixed stare in them, that if it had not been for the presence of his servants he would have taken her for her ghost. She waved the lackeys away with imperious gesture, and turning to her husband, said,—

“If you will be so good as to see me in the library for a few minutes, Mr Rowland, I will not detain you long, for I should be unwilling to remain in your house a moment longer than is necessary.”

The request seemed sensible ; he disliked scenes, and he knew there would be a scene if he did not comply, so with the haughtiest air he followed her into the library.

She advanced to the other side of the oak table, which stood in the centre of the room, and then turned facing him, her countenance lit up with an inexpressible look of bitterness and hate.

“You brute !” she exclaimed between her teeth, “how I loathe you !”

The expression on his face matched hers, ay, even surpassed it in its intensity of mutual dislike.

“What have you come here for ?” he asked, not heeding her complimentary beginning of the interview. “Tell me your business quickly and do me the honour then of relieving this house of your presence. You have done your best to disgrace it whilst you remained its mistress. It is time for me to show you that I will have no more such as you to reign in it. I will keep my peace and freedom secure when once I regain them. Come, say your say, madam, and begone !”

Husband and Wife

Whether this unaccustomed language to her had the desired effect it is impossible to say, for her eyes, as they glared at him, took a different expression. They softened perceptibly and great tears dimmed their azure depths ; she had not come to vent her hatred of him, but to seek a favour at his hands, for the sake of another, and one most dear to her. He saw the tears, but he regarded them as a bit of acting ; they had no more effect on him than on the oak table which stood between them.

“Are you sure you will succeed in regaining your freedom?” she asked. “Think first whether you have sufficient proof. You have none. Only to-day I was informed that your visit to your lawyers’ office was the cause of a great disappointment to you.”

He started violently. How on earth could she have known of this ?

She saw the start and secretly enjoyed it. “You see my case is being watched as well as yours,” she went on triumphantly. “They said the case for my defence will stand any amount of stock lies you would set up for my ruin. They said more than that in my favour. But it is not for any pleading of mine that I have come here to be insulted by your menials and yourself, but”—she hesitated, a great sob choked her, and she put up her hand to her throat and loosened the pretty ermine boa round her neck—“it is to beg of you just a little respite, Jack.” The familiar name came out involuntarily ; he coloured and bit his lips. She, however, seemed unaware of any irregularity, but continued : “I have just heard from my home and my mother ; they say she is dying—she is at anyrate very, very ill. I do not want her to die thinking bitterly of me as her dishonoured daughter. It would break her heart, it would embitter her end were she to hear of this pending divorce. I may have been weak, but oh, Jack ! she is dying, and I am going to her to see the last of her—” She broke off, overcome with grief.

“Ah !” he exclaimed with flashing eyes. “You

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acknowledge your frailty, do you? That avowal shall stand witness against you at court. Now, what more have you to say?"

She looked up astonished at his brutality. Her grief changed into indignation, into contempt, as she replied,—

"If you call my weakness of coming here an avowal of guilt, by all means do so. I am contemptibly weak and ignorant indeed not to know you better than expect you to be humane and decent by granting me such a simple request as that of delaying this unjust case until—"

"No, no; do not repeat it again," he cried. "It is too good for a play. Were you the good daughter you wish me to believe you would have proved an honourable wife."

"And you an honourable husband," she retorted. "Think you your own conduct was such as to set me an example of strict fidelity? I was a flirt to be sure, and denied obedience and honour to a man who can count his mistresses on his fingers and who is intimate with every common burlesque actress in the city. You are a bad, wicked man, and you may hope, but you will never get your freedom as you call it." She flung her boa round her and was preparing to leave the room when he intercepted her path.

"If I grant you the respite you wish," he said, with a cunning leer which was not lost on her, "will you promise not to defend the case? You won't lose much more than you have already done; and possibly, since you hate me so cordially, the case, when over, will be of benefit to you. You can marry this man Dale and live happy ever after."

"I will promise nothing," she said haughtily. "I shall possibly instruct my solicitors minutely with the names of all the women you have been intimate with, and furnish them with documentary evidences as well, so that I shall have no difficulty whatever in making

Meta and her Pupil

judge and jury believe what a virtuous man they have to deal with in the injured husband."

She advanced to the door, opened it, and went out, leaving him strictly nonplussed with this new aspect of affairs. It had never occurred to him before that in dragging her name through the mud he would simultaneously injure his own reputation and expose many chapters in his rapid life which were best kept sealed from public observation.

The revelation came to him unpleasantly ; it was, or seemed then, the death-blow to all his hopes. He stood several minutes apparently in deep thought, when he was roused by the silvery chimes of the cuckoo clock striking the sixth hour. He would be late for his appointment with "La Belle Marguerite," but that was no matter. He had no wish to be amused now. Her society and vulgarisms would be insupportable to the sudden fit of despondency that possessed him. No, he would remain quietly in the privacy of his own house and there pass the time as best he could.

As for La Belle Marguerite, why, she was a woman of no importance to him ! Let her gnash her teeth with rage at his non-appearance. A little disappointment would do her good !

CHAPTER X

META AND HER PUPIL

It was a grand idea of Winifred's that her new governess should be always stately in her manner and never degrade her dignity by unnecessary scolding and finding fault at lessons. This idea originated from the fact that Winifred cordially disliked her lessons and tried every loophole by which to escape from them. A

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first the little minx took rare advantage of her governess, nearly distracting her with a long list of her likes and dislikes, and chattering away nineteen to the dozen on every topic under the sun but those for which Miss Benson was qualified to instruct her. This was a novel position for a teacher, and after a few days of comparative idleness—so far as studies were concerned—and of exquisite pleasure, Meta protested gently but firmly. She explained that her presence at The Homestead was to *teach* Winifred and not to play the part of a lady-in-waiting. She received a pout for a reply and the declaration that nobody was wanted at The Homestead who would grind away at lessons all day, but one who would play with her and be amusing. "You can teach, you know, even when you are playing with me," said she; "for instance, you can tell me the story of Julius Cæsar and how he came to conquer England whilst I am dressing up my dolls for a walk. And you can explain all the capitals of Europe, and which country is largest or smallest or next in size when we are walking about in the grounds. I like to be out as much as possible, and it is not really necessary for me to sit bolt upright at the table in that booky schoolroom and learn away for dear life as if I were going to make learning my profession and earn my living as governess. You know I am to be a great heiress one day," she added, with an air of importance, as though intending to awe Meta with a sense of her high dignity. "I shall have thousands and thousands of pounds a year; all The Homestead estate, with the furniture, pictures, carriages and horses, will be mine; the servants here will look up to me as their mistress—even mamma will be a mere nobody in comparison to me. Papa said only the other day that she would have an annuity when she was a widow and a dower house to live in, but I shall be mistress as well as master here."

Then fearing that she had been snobbish in thus reminding Miss Benson of all these facts about herself (for

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Winifred had the instincts of a true lady in her), she ended the dispute by warmly embracing her governess and assuring her that after all things would go ever so smoothly and pleasantly if Meta would only be sensible and follow all her (Winifred's) wishes minutely. "We can have such a nice time together," she continued ; "we have everything here to make us happy. Besides, just fancy how ruinous to your pretty complexion if you wasted yourself teaching me four or five hours a day. I shouldn't be any the wiser, and you would be much the worse for wear. So just be a dear old darling and do just as I tell you."

Meta laughed ; it was lucky for her that this spoilt little pet of Fortune liked her and admired her ; had there been the smallest *souçon* of aversion on Winifred's part her life would have been made a burden to her, and she would have been told by the parents of this *enfant terrible* that she had no idea of managing a child like this one, and that other arrangements must be made for her instruction. Therefore, as days and weeks passed she gradually and imperceptibly fell into all her pupil's ways, and did just as she was told, with the exception that she took care to seize every opportunity of teaching by means of story-telling. As this was Winifred's own suggestion she could have no objection further than by occasionally remonstrating at the number of stories that were told her daily of a biblical, historical and geographical character.

"Can't you tell me a fairy story ?" she asked one day when she had brought out on the lawn her whole paraphernalia of dolls, etc., and had seated herself on a cushion with the intention of having a doll's tea-party. "I am so tired of those everlasting historical characters of yours, and it is quite a puzzle for me to remember which was the first man God made—Adam or Noah. Noah was saved, Adam was not ; and Noah had an ark which floated on the water forty days, and Adam, though he had a Garden of Eden given him to live in,

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had a wife and serpent to tease him out of its possession. Now I would much prefer Noah to be the first man, because he was ever so much more interesting with his animals and his three sons—Jam, Ham and Junket. They put me in mind of my tea-party.” And seriously Winifred set herself to spread out the dainty china for a Lilliputian feast.

Meta did not know whether to laugh or scold. Had she been a model instructress she would have done the latter. But she was disposed to be indulgent, and instead of taking the child to task she joined in the tea-party and entertained Winifred with a wonderful fairy story. Mrs and Miss Balfour also condescended to be much pleased with this new acquisition to their household, and honoured her by a daily invitation to join them at dinner, and in the evenings, when her charming musical talents helped to make time pass agreeably. Winifred generally retired at any hour that most pleased her, and was always one of the party at the seven-o’clock dinner. It had been put back an hour earlier for her special convenience, as the eight o’clock sumptuous repast was considered much too late for her little ladyship. Her father denied her nothing, and would have submitted to even a more unfashionable hour of dining if the doing so secured him his daughter’s society. He loved to hear her half-childish, half grown-up prattle, and encouraged her to monopolise the conversation at table and set the ball going for everybody. To this the mother and aunt said nothing; it would have been useless if they had. Mr Balfour was undoubtedly master, and Winifred reigning mistress.

He often visited the schoolroom and playroom, joining in all Winifred’s amusements as though he had nothing else on his mind but to please her. His courtesy to Meta never failed; but, strange to say, she did not like him, and his frequent presence made her feel uncomfortable. But she took good care to conceal this unaccountable feeling of aversion, for to manifest it by look or

Meta and her Pupil

manner would have been fatal to her further sojourn at The Homestead.

One day he entered the playroom and found them engaged in a game called "forfeits." His entrance naturally put a stop to it, and Winifred, seeing that his attention was devoted to asking Miss Benson questions as to how she was getting on with her studies, wisely took no notice, but pretended to be amused with some fresh toy just given her.

"You look tired," remarked Mr Balfour. "I am afraid you find Winifred a very exacting pupil."

Meta did indeed look very tired. It had been a pouring wet day and she had done nothing since breakfast but be at Winifred's beck and call. Confinement indoors through inclement weather always made the spoilt child fractious. She confessed to feeling slightly fatigued, and amiably attributed it to the dismal state of the weather.

"Are you fond of reading?" he asked in his friendliest manner. "If so, there are heaps of books in the library downstairs which are entirely at your service. Let me fetch you some now."

"Oh, no!" cried Meta. "Pray do not trouble, I have so little time for reading. I do not know what Winifred will say if she found me with a book when I ought to be attending to her."

"But Winifred must learn not to be selfish," said Mr Balfour; and addressing his daughter in a half-playful tone he chided her for not allowing Miss Benson some leisure and quiet to herself.

"Miss Benson is not fond of reading," said Winifred, in a voice that clearly implied her father was not to interfere. "She doesn't even read the newspapers. She says she never looks at a paper or magazine if she can possibly help it. And I don't blame her; I think newspapers are only meant for men and old maids to read, and Meta is neither manly nor old-maidish. If she were she would not be such a favourite with me. Papa,

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she tells me she can ride," continued the infant, changing the subject conveniently, "and I thought it would be so nice if she had mamma's horse, and we can go out riding together. Will you let her have Dolly Dimple, papa? I should like her to have Dolly Dimple."

Mr Balfour was pleasantly surprised to hear this, and without hesitation promised Winifred that Meta should have the use of Dolly Dimple now that Mrs Balfour had practically given up riding.

Meta had not mounted since she was a school-girl in her teens, but she had been passionately fond of the exercise, and had ridden well in those days when her prospects had been so bright and happy. To ride a thorough-bred mare like Dolly Dimple, whom she had seen and admired in her luxurious loose-box at the stables, was a treat she well appreciated; and her eyes sparkled with unfeigned delight when, later on, the proposal was taken to Mrs Balfour, who most willingly endorsed her husband's permission.

"You will find Dolly perfection," said she, languidly. "I am only too glad to think that she will have daily exercise now. It was my intention to ask you whether you could ride when I was interviewing you—but I see it is all right."

It was Mrs Balfour's custom to remind the girl occasionally of her position in the household, but she did it in such a languid, unobtrusive manner that even proud, sensitive Meta could not take umbrage at it.

But she liked the new governess as much as it was possible for her selfish, lazy nature to like anybody. At anyrate, she signified her favour in a practical way by making her a present of a beautiful riding-habit, ordered by telegram from Redfern's.

A Ride in the Forest

CHAPTER XI

A RIDE IN THE FOREST

It was with some natural pride and vanity that Meta was gazing at herself in the cheval glass; she looked remarkably well in her riding-habit; it became her slim, supple figure to perfection. She was thinking this when Winifred rushed in *sans cérémonie* to ask if she was ready.

"Oh, how nice you look!" exclaimed this candid observer, admiringly. "Much nicer than mamma ever did in *her* habit. She never held herself up as you do, and she always looked as if she were going to fall asleep in the saddle."

"Hush, Winifred! you must not speak disrespectfully of your mother. It is very, very wrong."

"Papa lets me," remonstrated Winifred. "I have said the same thing to him, and he has only laughed. Now, guess who is coming with us."

Meta devoutly hoped it was not Mr Balfour, and in reply said, with an attempt at indifference, "Your aunt very possibly. It would be pleasant having her."

"No," said Winifred, decidedly, "you are wrong. Papa himself is coming; that really is a great honour, for he seldom even goes out with mamma and auntie. But I asked him specially to join us to-day. He is ready, waiting for us in the hall, so come along. I shall be the first to get on my pony."

She flew away, leaving Meta to follow in a more leisurely manner. All the girl's anticipation of pleasure for this her favourite exercise vanished. She disliked with growing vehemence the apparent eagerness with which Mr Balfour was always courting her society. It was evident that his daughter was not the only attraction.

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He had looked at her very frequently of late, and in a bold, pronounced way that displeased her. She remembered Major Bankes and all the trouble his frank, thoughtless attentions had cost her. She was inwardly determined that no such thing should occur again; rather than make herself unnecessarily agreeable to the master of The Homestead and give any loophole for outside gossip she would err on the other side and keep him at a distance by her coldness and reserve. With these reflections surging in her mind she descended the handsome, wide staircase, assuming, as she did so, that air of dignity which well became her, and which enhanced and ennobled her attractive personality.

That was at least Mr Balfour's opinion as his eyes caught sight of her in the act of descending. Only a very elegant woman could glide down the stairs in a riding-habit. Most women are afraid of tripping, and to prevent this are apt to lift the long skirt too much before their feet, which gives them at once an awkward appearance.

"She is a little queen in her way," he remarked to himself, as he watched her with a critical air. "I hope Winifred will look like that when she is grown up." Then aloud to her, as she reached the hall, "We have a glorious day for our ride, Miss Benson. I trust you will thoroughly enjoy your first ride in the forest."

Meta thought she would, and said so gravely enough.

"I have had the freshness taken out of Dolly," went on Mr Balfour, complacently. "I think you will find her ripping, she has been well exercised this morning."

Winifred had already mounted with the aid of one of the grooms in charge of the horses, and amused herself in flicking her pony with the whip, "to make him dance," she explained. Her spirited little nag was rearing and curving impatiently, and threatening his mistress with a spill, when Mr Balfour and the governess appeared on the scene.

"Be careful, Winifred!" called out the former in

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alarm. "That pony of yours won't stand much nonsense."

Winifred bridled, and ceased teasing the animal. She galloped away down the carriage drive until she reached the lodge gate, and there she waited for her companions. As Meta cantered along by the side of Mr Balfour, the little sprite watched her critically. The observing intelligence of this *blase* infant of the world saw that her governess's seat on horseback was perfect, and that she looked like a young countess on thoroughbred Dolly.

"I like you more than ever now I see that you can ride," said she to Meta. And as her father glanced at her reprovingly she scampered off on her pony, leaving them to follow.

"This is the forest primeval," said Mr Balfour, pleasantly, as he patted his beautiful Arab on the neck and felt he was in good company. "The landscape before us is prophetic of coming summer," he added.

"There is no season in the year so beautiful as spring, I think," said Meta, as she looked around at the magnificent scenery, and felt how delightful, how glorious life was when face to face with all the beauties of Nature.

"Is it not in spring that the young man's heart turns lightly to thoughts of love?" said Mr Balfour, smiling. "Poets have a knack of interpreting all our actions in their own way; and spring and love, they say, go hand-in-hand. Springtime certainly is a highly productive sort of season, and therefore it is no wonder that it is so much depended upon for romance and fiction. Now, summer is my favourite time of the year. There is no east wind then to endanger one's health, and there is plenty of sunshine to cheer one's heart. No, Miss Benson, give me twelve months of summer and I shall be the most contented man in England." And he gave Meta one of his bold, admiring glances that she so much disliked.

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She bore the look patiently, however, saying, in a low, distant voice, which she thought would preclude all possibility of any approach to familiarity, "I am afraid no weather in this country would ever make an Englishman thoroughly contented and happy; he would still have the heat to complain of if he had not the east wind."

"True," returned Mr Balfour, readily agreeing with her at the expense of acknowledging himself wrong. "There seems to be some pleasure in being discontented. If it is not the weather it is something else that does not please us. Our actions, for instance, the past-and-done-for chapters in our lives, the consequences of which still remain to remind us of our folly. I think," he continued, as though anxious to bring the conversation to a certain point, "there is no unhappiness on earth so great, so productive of ceaseless gnawing discontent as an unfortunate marriage. Every nine men out of ten can say their say on this subject. I have a friend now, a very dear friend, who is bitterly reaping the effects of his folly in choosing his wife in a hurry. Ten years ago he would have cut his throat if she had refused his offer, and now, behold, he is ready to cut his throat in despair because he can't get rid of her soon enough!" And Mr Balfour laughed.

"I have no sympathy with such a man as that," said Meta, severely. "I daresay he is more to blame than she is."

Whilst speaking she was wondering whether Mr Balfour was referring to his own marriage, and why he touched on the delicate subject of marriage at all. Certainly his own venture in this respect was not an ideal one; there was not much love lost between himself and his wife; he had a polite way of setting her down on all occasions and allowing Winifred to go unchecked when impertinent to her mother, which Meta resented in one who was the pink of courtesy to outsiders.

"It is very evident that you are not married, my

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dear Miss Benson," replied Mr Balfour with another laugh. "No married lady would ever express such an opinion. My friend has chosen wrongly; that is his misfortune. Marriage is a lottery, and we men generally draw a blank where we hope to win a treasure. That also is a misfortune. But when the wives we choose fail to do their duty by us we have only one alternative, and that is divorce, and try again for better luck."

"How horrid!" exclaimed Meta with unfeigned disgust. "No respectable girl or woman would ever marry a divorced man. She must be as low-minded as he is if she does. I know if I had a sister and she had married a man under those circumstances I should cut her dead in the street. I should positively despise her."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr Balfour, astonished at her boldness of speech. "And you would never marry a divorced man, even if he was a man of rank, of unbounded wealth, and he had asked you to marry him?"

"Not if he had a wife living. Most certainly not."

"Dear me! but heaps of women do."

"Heaps of women do, but they must do it feeling very uncomfortable all the while when they remember the real wife's existence. I am afraid I shall be a very exacting sort of person for a man to wish to marry. I must be the only one and the all-in-all to my husband's existence. I should kill him, I think, or kill myself, if I thought he were unfaithful to me."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr Balfour again, and he laughed his short, well-bred laugh; but to himself he said, "She is a rare one for saying what she thinks. I wonder what Rowland would say if he heard her. No chance for him in this quarter, even if he does get his divorce. More likely game for a widower, I should fancy."

Meta, fearing that she had been too emphatic in the expression of her opinions regarding husbands and

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divorced men, was suddenly seized with a great anxiety for Winifred.

"Do you think it is quite safe for her to be riding by herself so far ahead?" she asked.

"Quite," was his laconic answer. "Winifred is a most independent sort of person, as you will learn before you have been many months here."

He then engaged her again in conversation, and showed by his pleasant manner that he had not been at all offended by her freedom of speech. In the meantime Winifred preferred her own company and led her pony a nice dance across the turf; then again a gallop under the trees, and then a mad break-neck canter through the woody lanes of Epping Forest. She kept her father and governess at a great distance behind, looking back now and then to see that they were following her lead and that she was not quite lost to their view. Suddenly, in the midst of one of her mad gallops, she came to a momentary standstill, and looked all round her to see which turning she should take. She had reached the top of a long road where two other roads met—the one led to Chingford and the other to Leytonstone and on to London town. Miss Winifred had no wish to ride to London town, so she turned her pony's head towards Chingford and gave rein for another mad gallop. She had not cleared half the length of that broad white road, where she was entirely lost sight of by her companions, when she was startled by a cry repeated over and over again, like that of some animal in pain. She stopped suddenly and listened. The cry was repeated. It seemed to proceed from the other side of the road, within a copse near. She was a child who knew not what it was to fear; her curiosity and love of adventure were roused. In the twinkling of an eye she was off her pony, whom she ordered, with her usual imperiousness, to "stand still" in a voice that he dared not disobey, and she had jumped across the narrow ditch on her way to the spot where the noise arose from.

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There, extended on some brambles, lay bleeding a wounded baby-deer. It was so small and so pitiful, as it lay uttering that moan of pain from time to time, that Winifred advanced boldly, and on inspection saw a great cut across the animal's thigh. The child's tender little heart was moved at the sight. She took the drooping head in her arms and hugged it by way of showing her sympathy. The fawn was too weak to remonstrate, though, if it had been consulted, it would have preferred a more practical form of compassion, such as having its wound bathed and some water given to refresh its parched mouth. Whilst she was weeping and hugging the animal she heard sounds of a footstep close to her, and looking up saw that another person had come to the rescue.

It was a gentleman ; she fancied in her agitation that she had seen him somewhere before, but her mind was too full with the fawn and its sufferings to recognise him further than appealing to him for help, so she cried, in her quick, impulsive way,—

"I am so glad to see you. Look at this poor little darling. I found it wounded and bleeding. I am afraid it will die, and it is only a baby-deer, it is such a pity it should die so young. Please do something to cure it."

There was a pond quite close to where they were. Epping Forest abounds in ponds and brooks, and the new-comer, seeing the matter at a glance, and knowing exactly what to do, ran to the water's edge and filled his large round hat with it. He came back to the child, and kneeling down began bathing the wound and getting the creature to drink a little of the cool liquid. The latter seemed what it most wanted, for it drank as eagerly as its weak condition would allow.

"Will it die ?" asked Winifred after a while.

"No, it will not die ; I will save it," was the reply.

He skilfully tied up the cut with the handkerchief, and handled the animal as tenderly as if it had been a baby.

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Winifred feared no more for the fawn's life, but looked with respect at this clever gentleman who had come in the nick of time he was wanted.

"Well," he said, smiling at her scrutiny. "Don't you know me?"

"Yes, of course I do," cried Winifred, delighted. "You are Mr Falkner, the Vicar of St Mary's, High Beech."

"And you are little Miss Balfour of The Homestead," returned Mr Falkner. "How is it that you don't come to the children's flower-service as you used to? I have missed you."

Winifred shook her head. "Papa does not care for me to go," she replied frankly. "Besides that I have not had a governess to take me until lately. Nurse, you know, goes out on Sunday afternoons."

"And now that you have a governess, suppose you ask your father if you might come next Sunday. There will be a special children's service, and I want you to bring flowers for the sick at the hospital. You would like to come, would you not? See how kind and tender you have been to this poor suffering fawn; you can be just as thoughtful for the little ones of Christ's flock."

"I shall ask papa," said Winifred, impetuously. She rose from her knees, intent on putting the question before her father there and then, when her quick eyes caught sight of him cantering towards the spot, alarm written distinctly on his face. He had observed the riderless pony in the middle of the road, and he and Meta naturally came to the conclusion that some accident had befallen the child.

The sound of her voice set his fears at rest. He saw that she was not alone, which fact did not deter him from dismounting, and lifting up the childish figure he kissed her passionately. "What a fright you have given me, my darling! What are you doing here?"

"It was the wounded baby-deer, papa!" explained

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Winifred, receiving her father's caresses placidly, and inwardly thinking him very foolish to go on so before Mr Falkner. "I was obliged to leave my pony and come to it. Look ! Mr Falkner has made it quite well again."

Mr Balfour put the child down and turned his attention to the Reverend Mr Falkner. "I am pleased to see you," he said cordially enough. He raised his hat with one hand and offered the other.

Mr Falkner had no hat to raise ; his clerical shovel was lying drenched on the ground, very much the worse for wear and water. But he took the proffered hand very eagerly. The Homestead folks, as he had said to Meta, were his parishioners ; they were the only ones in his parish who were not friendly with him. Mr Balfour had avoided him several times, and had made it very clear that he disliked the clergy. Hence his constant refusal to allow Winifred to attend St Mary's, or to come in contact with the Vicar, whose influence over children, he had heard, was marvellous. The reverend gentleman, however, bore no malice.

"I am so glad," said he, "I arrived in time to prevent Miss Winifred from hugging the animal to death or drowning herself and the creature in tears. I think I will carry it home with me, and then report the circumstance to a forest-ranger. I don't fancy they will take me up for poaching, even if I should meet one on the way home."

"Possibly not," replied Mr Balfour, laughing. "You have been playing the part of a good Samaritan to a very pretty little deer ;" and putting up his eye-glass he proceeded to examine the cause of all this pleasant excitement.

Meanwhile Miss Benson remained on the road and could just hear all that was passing. She had instantly recognised in Mr Falkner the grave and friendly clergyman who had driven her to The Homestead a few weeks ago. She saw also, by the glances he threw in her direction,

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that he too remembered her. She was cogitating in her mind whether it would be wise and proper to confess to having met him previously, when the whole party emerged from the underwood and came towards her. Mr Falkner bore the wounded fawn in his arms. Winifred ran across the ditch with a laugh and a joyous shout of greeting, and mounted her pony without loss of time. Mr Balfour, with grave stateliness, explained to Meta what had happened.

"Papa, papa," interrupted the spoilt child, "can I go to the flower-service next Sunday? Mr Falkner has asked me and I have promised him. And Meta darling"—she broke off without waiting for a reply—"you shall take me. And I will bring such a basket of flowers and fruit, Mr Falkner—the finest and biggest of all—for the sick children."

"Gently, my darling child," said the fond father. "Perhaps Miss Benson may not care to attend a flower-service."

Meta hastened to say that she cared for nothing so much, and that it was the prettiest sight imaginable to her. She said this with such a glowing face, and such a grateful look at Mr Falkner, whose acquaintance she was absolutely longing to renew, that Mr Balfour began to think there was something magical in a children's flower-service to call forth so much emotion and gladness. He willingly gave his consent, and prepared to mount his horse.

"Good-bye," said Winifred to Mr Falkner. "Take great care of the poor darling. To-morrow morning Miss Benson and I will call at the Vicarage to see if it is better. Let me introduce you to my governess. The Reverend Mr Falkner—Miss Benson." And with a mischievous laugh the naughty little sprite scuttled away on her pony, the veriest sunbeam to her father's eyes as he watched her.

She saw Him

CHAPTER XII

“She saw him,
And her heaven grew dark at his coming.”

THAT ride was considered a success by all parties concerned in it. It raised Meta in the estimation of her employers, and it fully convinced Winifred that her governess was the cleverest and prettiest person in the world. On her return home she rushed into her mother's boudoir and related all that had occurred. She lauded Meta to the skies and expressed her great approval of Mr Falkner, who, she declared, had behaved most charmingly, and must be invited to dinner at the earliest opportunity.

“We don't take any notice of him,” said she, decisively; “and it really does show such want of good taste not to countenance our Vicar's presence in the house. When will you invite him, mamma?”

“My love,” interposed Mrs Balfour, who had been somewhat rudely awakened from her nap by this small avalanche, “don't you think you ought to leave those sort of things for your father and me to decide? It is not becoming really for a little girl like you.”

“Little girl indeed!” interrupted naughty Winifred. “I have much more sense than some grown-up people of my acquaintance. But I am going to have him invited all the same; papa, I know, will not object when once I have put the matter before him. Mr Falkner must come to the very first dinner-party we give. And I shall call and see his mother; they say she is a dear old lady and passionately devoted to children. Meta shall come with me.” Having said this, in her most imperious manner, the spoilt child left the room as

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abruptly as she had entered, leaving her weak parent a victim to nervous headache.

Meta had gone into her room to dress for dinner. She was possessed with a desire for solitude, and hoped her pupil would not break on her quiet until it was time to appear in the drawing-room. She had thoroughly enjoyed her ride—ay, even more than enjoyed it. It had been a delicious sensation meeting Mr Falkner; why it should be so she could not tell. Many a time during the six weeks of her stay at The Homestead she had been tempted to speak of him, but she refrained, for it had been made clear to her from the very first that the Balfours disapproved of the clergy, and had often spoken to her on the subject with a view to discourage any coming into contact with them. The Sundays she had passed in drives and indoor amusements; no one in that establishment troubled about going to church, and as she herself was not very keen about going, they took it as a matter of course that she did not care about doing so. But now this desire of Winifred's to attend the children's flower-service was a new departure, and a very pleasant one, for it would materially lend itself to her making a friend of the Vicar. Whilst dressing, she resolved to encourage Winifred all she could in these forthcoming visits to the Parsonage. The fawn at present was a good excuse; it would lead, no doubt, to better things. If Mr Falkner had charmed Winifred he most certainly had done the same to her governess; there was pleasurable excitement in the thought of meeting him, and the excitement made her flush rosy-red with joy.

She put on her prettiest white dress, which had a sort of train to it, and made her foolishly think of bridal robes and orange blossoms. The frock was of white cashmere, and she had bought it for her confirmation a year ago. She had worn the usual tulle or net veil with it, and the remembrance somehow cast a pervading air of purity over her thoughts. She remembered the good

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resolutions she had made whilst kneeling before the altar awaiting the touch of the Bishop's hand on her head. Just such a scene, only different in meaning, would happen again in her life, when, robed once more in white, she would plight her troth to someone whom she had not yet seen but who would be her fate.

A pensive fit followed these recollections, and as she had now finished her toilet and had plenty of time on her hands before dinner, she resolved to take a quiet walk by herself in the grounds. Soon she found herself on the terrace leading into the principal drive. Here she could stroll about unseen and unnoticed.

Several of the dogs came up to claim her attention. She knew them all by name now, and kindly patted each one on the head. She kept them off, however, from being too demonstrative, as she wished the purity of her white dress to remain unmarked by their paws. They seemed to understand her wish and respected it accordingly. Whilst she proceeded slowly on her way the well-bred quadrupeds followed at her heels, forming a bodyguard round her. She observed this and smiled, pleased by such canine attentions. She had not gone very far through the avenue of trees when suddenly a tremendous peal from the bell at the lodge-gate roused the dogs to a sense of their duty. With a hop, skip and scamper they flew down the carriage drive, barking, howling and snapping with anxiety to ascertain the cause of the intrusion.

"Some visitor's arrival, I should fancy," said Meta, half aloud. "I wonder who it can be? I shall hide in the shrubbery and peep." She did so, and in a very short time her curiosity was rewarded by the sight of a tall, dark man, faultlessly dressed, stalking along with an air of familiarity with The Homestead and its grounds; the dogs were escorting him in quite a friendly manner. He certainly was exceedingly well-looking, Meta thought, and he had a very distinguished, soldierly bearing. His face was very handsome—a clean-shaven, clean-cut

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physiognomy, with every feature perfect and expressive ; the large round head, surmounted with its ebon hair, was reared with an air of pride, as though of one born to command. He carried a walking-stick in one hand and a lighted cigar in the other ; as he stepped along briskly he called the dogs by name, and looked neither here nor there until he passed the shrubbery close by, and then he turned round quickly and looked back. As the shadow of his tall stately figure rested on her where she stood, Meta shivered as if a sudden chill had blighted her. She could not account for the feeling ; a cold sensation, that deadened her senses for the time being and made her feel sick, came over her.

She waited till he had again resumed his walk to the house door, and then she left her hiding-place behind the trees, glad to think that she had not been observed.

But she was mistaken ; the visitor had not only seen her, but had taken stock of every detail in her appearance.

Poor Meta was like the female ostrich, who hides her head in the sand and fancies herself hidden from the whole world.

A nervous terror possessed the girl that she had caught cold, and she felt that the sooner she returned to the house the better. So, without further deliberation, she regained the schoolroom, where there was a fire, and she sat very near it, with her mind full of the man she had just seen.

It was near the dinner-hour before she could summon up courage to go into the drawing-room, where instinct and common sense told her she would again meet this *beau ideal* of a fine gentleman.

In the broad corridor opposite the reception-room door she met Mrs and Miss Balfour coming out of their rooms. The latter smiled sweetly and asked after Winifred, but Mrs Balfour hesitated as though preparing to speak.

"By the way, Miss Benson," said she, languidly, "I

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meant to send up a message to say that as we had a guest for dinner you and Winifred had best dine in the schoolroom and come down afterwards."

"Certainly," said Meta, rather taken back at this request; "I will go and look for Winifred." She feared a disturbance from that quarter and secretly dreaded a scene with the spoilt child. But her fears were groundless, for Winifred had been already dealt with and had consented to this arrangement. On entering the drawing-room Meta found her pupil seated on the knee of the visitor, to whom she was volubly relating their riding adventure in the forest.

"And here is Meta!" she exclaimed joyously; "and now I must leave you, for we are going to dine together in the schoolroom."

Her friend detained her. "How is that?" he asked. "Why am I to be deprived of your society the first evening of my arrival? Ah, leave me not!" And he assumed a tone and manner at once half-playful, half-tragic. Winifred laughed. She could be very good on certain occasions, and this was one of them.

"Oh, you will see a lot of me," she said, "for you are going to stop a long time with us. After dinner Miss Benson and I will come down to the drawing-room, and we will entertain you with music and singing. She sings beautifully—you must hear her."

"After dinner, my child, you must go straight to bed," said Mr Balfour; "I never saw you look so tired in my life."

Meta took Winifred by the hand, and as they were leaving the room she heard Mrs Balfour's lazy murmur of a voice saying,—

"That is our new governess—Miss Benson. Winifred is so fond of her!"

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CHAPTER XIII

WINIFRED'S INNOCENT FALSEHOOD

AND this seemed Meta's highest recommendation—that her pupil was fond of her. This also, she thought, was all the introduction that could be expected between a man in Rowland's position and a girl who was only a governess. She felt out of temper with herself and Winifred, and during dinner preserved a stately and reserved demeanour, which very much impressed that acute little personage.

"What do you think of my god-papa?" she asked, in the midst of consuming a game rissole served up with port-wine sauce. "He came quite unexpectedly to-day, and I have been such a while chatting to him and telling him everything. To-morrow I shall ask him what he thinks of you, and whether he fancies you are at all *distingué* in appearance. He ought to know, as he is quite the most fashionable and the most run after man in London."

"Winifred," said Meta, very much alarmed, and blushing a vivid colour, "please do not ask him anything of the kind. Do not mention my name even. It would be bad form to do so."

Winifred laughed. "What a colour you have turned!" said she. "Where can the harm be? When people have eyes they use them, and Mr Rowland is like me, he is fond of pretty people."

"Hush, Winifred! How can you be so naughty? Mr Rowland is no doubt a married man, and his wife—"

"His wife is dead," burst out Winifred, quickly. "I only asked him an hour ago why he did not bring his wife with him as he used to years past, but he said she was dead—and he said it in such a way—'Dead to me, she

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is dead," repeated the child, mimicking Rowland's deep voice—"never mention her again." That is what he said," she concluded triumphantly.

"Then you ought to be sorry," said Meta, reprovingly; "especially as she was a friend of yours."

"I didn't like her at all; she was always so cross when I was in the room. She said she hated children; that is why she never had any. Now, Mr Rowland is quite different; he is so nice and so fond of children. He would give anything to have a little daughter like me, because he has heaps and heaps of money and landed property, and he will be a viscount one day when his father dies—more's the pity, for he has no son to succeed him. We all think it such a pity," she continued, as the footman brought in some dainty dishes and placed them before her delighted eyes. "We all think it such a pity that he had such a cross wife when he himself is such a nice man. There, Miss Benson, you shall help this *vols-au-vent*, it looks delicious; I will have some of it, please."

Meta was aghast at her greediness, and secretly condemned Mr and Mrs Balfour as the most unwise of parents to allow the child's unnatural appetite so much scope for indigestion. But she thought it prudent to say nothing, however.

Presently a message came for Miss Winifred to come to dessert, and she ran away delightedly, leaving Meta to follow to the drawing-room later on.

She did not leave the schoolroom until the nurse had fetched Winifred to bed. She met the child on the staircase and bade her an affectionate "Good-night."

"To-morrow, darling," said she, tenderly, "we will go and see how the fawn is. You will like that, would you not?"

"Yes," replied Winifred, sleepily. "And you can talk as much as you like to Mr Falkner, for I have introduced him properly, you know."

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Meta blushed and turned away quickly, for fear it should be noticed and remarked upon by the precocious one.

She entered the drawing-room in the capacity of entertainer, and feeling this she made her *entrée* timidly.

The apartment was spacious and handsome, as were all the reception-rooms of The Homestead. The rich and luxurious furniture bore the usual evidences of wealth and good taste. The walls were covered with magnificent pictures, all more or less masterpieces of great artists. They were not "copies," as Mr Balfour was anxious to impress on all who took notice of them. Some of them had been purchased under great difficulty and expense, but one and all they were fine specimens of individual merit. The whole apartment gave one an idea of comfort and ease in spite of its grand stateliness, for it was well provided with easy chairs, luxurious settees, soft rest-inviting divans beset with cushions, etc. The fairy lights threw a subdued charm over all, and the gorgeous lamps were covered with rose-coloured shades, each shade a *chef-d'œuvre* of artistic talent.

Here with her chronic indolence, in a cosy corner beneath the crimson glow of a huge standard lamp, sat, or rather reclined, the lady of the house. Her hands, as usual, lay idle on her lap, her thoughts at rest, her body at rest, and her senses luxuriating in all this grandeur and comfort; she was intensely happy, because so intensely lazy. There was a look of expectancy on her face, which actually brightened up as Meta entered.

"What a time you have been coming!" she murmured. "We have been waiting for your music. What has kept you?"

"I am sorry," said Meta, advancing into the middle of the room. "I should have come sooner if I had known you were waiting, Mrs Balfour."

She looked exceedingly handsome and statuesque as

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she stood there in her trailing white robe, her small shapely head thrown back, her lithe figure as supple as a wood-nymph's, her perfect face all aglow with health, and her eyes—they looked strangely beautiful this evening, they were so dilated, so luminous, as though the soul in her shone through them with some restless inward excitement of coming bliss or misery.

"Sing and play, if you please," commanded Mrs Balfour in as irritable a voice as her laziness would allow.

"You see what it is to have such charming talents," said Mr Balfour, emerging from the other end of the spacious apartment, where he had been conversing with his sister and guest. "We look forward to the evenings to revel in them."

Meta smiled, her manner was strained. She resolved to give them of her best without loss of time, and then to ask leave to retire early on plea of fatigue. So she seated herself at the grand instrument, one of Erard's choicest, and commenced Mrs Balfour's favourite "Moonlight Sonata" from memory. She played and sang mostly by rote; her musical talent was unmistakable. Major Bankes had not exaggerated when he described her as a finished performer or an accomplished singer. She was both. Her voice was of good compass, and there were sweet notes in it that many a professional would have envied. To-night, for some reason or other, she surpassed herself. She gave Mrs Balfour the fullest benefit of her extensive repertoire, and filled that room with dulcet sounds of melody.

They were profuse in their thanks, with the exception of the Honourable Jack Rowland, who sat and listened and said nothing.

Mrs Balfour, at the conclusion, asked for that "quaint Scotch ditty" which, she said, Miss Benson rendered with so much feeling—"Comin' thro' the Rye."

Meta obediently sang it, and then when it was

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finished murmured her good-night and left the room. She was glad to think that Mr Balfour had not this evening vexed her by standing beside her chair whilst she sang and played, or pestered her with his bold glances and unnecessary attentions. He had been seated by his guest, to whose opinion he had often appealed respecting the special merits of this or that piece or song, to all of which remarks he received but short replies. Music silenced the Honourable Jack, and though he passionately loved it, it seemed to have a gloomy effect on his savage breast.

“How proud and disagreeable he is!” said Meta to herself as she undressed and got to bed. “I suppose as it was only Meta Benson the governess singing he did not think it necessary to make a fuss. Perhaps if it had been Miss Balfour (who, by the way, croaks like a frog), or some other lady of his own rank in life, he would have been polite enough to express his thanks and approval. I think I shall hate him. I wonder how long he intends to stay? To-morrow I shall have the satisfaction of renewing my acquaintance with Mr Falkner. How very *nice* he is. I am so glad Winifred made all that fuss about the wounded fawn. It has been the means of bringing me face to face with him again. I am very, very happy indeed.” And with a sleepy sigh she soon fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

THE REVEREND ROBERT FALKNER

THE little church of St Mary's, High Beech, had once been the talk of the neighbourhood. The reason why was clearly answered. It dealt in too many new-fangled notions of Ritualism, so the people said, to be really orthodox and popular.

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The Vicar was a man who sympathised with the Oxford Movement of '33, and one who rejoiced in the fact that he was also a member of the English Church Union.

The rustics at first refused to believe in him; they had been accustomed to the most simple form of worship, and they objected to the new parson's "goings on," as they termed it. But very gradually they got used to the decided improvements Mr Falkner introduced in their midst: the services were bright and hearty, and appealed to their good feelings somehow; certainly things were a little more advanced than they had been, but every simple rite had been properly explained to them, and there was no reason why they should not enjoy good music and pretty services since their attitude still remained distinctly Protestant. The cry of "No popery!" ceased: there was something in the man, in his exceeding kindness and courtesy, his never-tiring solicitude in all that concerned their daily life, which compelled their admiration and secured their good opinion. Amongst the poor and needy of his congregation his influence was great: they had only to be ill or in trouble and their Vicar would be the first to come to them with his help and sympathy. Here was no preacher only, but a man who acted up to the precepts he taught, and whose holy, active and blameless life was an open book to them. The parishioners very soon, one and all, gave up their intention of complaining to the Bishop. If they approached the Diocesan at all it would be to thank his lordship for sending such a practical saint amongst them to preach the gospel. St Mary's-in-the-Forest rapidly became a most popular place of worship, and was sometimes so crowded that it was utterly impossible to find room for everybody.

Near it, and standing on a level with the hill on which it stood, was the picturesque Parsonage, where Mr Falkner and his mother lived—a large, rambling, old-

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fashioned building, the abode of domestic peace and happiness. The simple household consisted of three maid-servants and an elderly man, who was groom, gardener and a general right-hand man all round. A very honest fellow was Jukes, devoted to his master, with whom he had played cricket when a boy, and whom he now regarded as a miracle of all that was good in human nature. Jukes himself was near sixty, but he was hale and hearty still, and gave promise of another twenty years or more, all being well.

Old Mrs Falkner was as much beloved in the parish as her son ; she was active in her charities, as ready with her sympathy and help as he. The infirmities of age and rheumatism proved no obstacle to the exercise of benevolence. When she was not visiting the sick and poor in their humble cottages, debarred necessarily through indisposition, she was employed in some practical plan or other for their comfort—they were seldom from her thoughts. Poverty, with all its attendant wants and suffering, was a complaint which roused all her tenderness, and she looked on it as on some disease, which only incessant thought and labour could remedy. She had not an idle moment ; those deft, wrinkled hands of hers were employed daily and almost hourly in manufacturing needful garments for the needy.

To-day found her busy as usual at her wool work ; an enormous shawl was on the eve of completion, and the dear old lady was eager to finish it and despatch it to the bed-ridden woman it was intended for. The anticipation of the pleasure it would arouse in the heart of the poor suffering recipient caused the kind heart of the giver to glow with satisfaction. Occasionally her eyes wandered from her work to the flower-beds on the front lawn ; and round the window-ledge of the dining-room, where she sat, some tall hydrangeas, conscious of their superiority in height, and the fact that they had recently been much admired, towered their lofty heads in front of the window, and peeped impertinently enough

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to see what she was doing. The narcissi and jonquils, the scarlet geranium and ever-refreshing mignonette bordering the sod beneath the window where Mrs Falkner sat, sent up their grateful perfume. These all were her especial care ; Jukes had no hand in the rearing of these particular beds, for his mistress regarded them as her exclusive property. Had she been speaking her thoughts aloud you might have heard her address them thus : "How well you look this morning, you pretty dears ! The rain has refreshed you, and the sun now is shining to give joy to your hearts of gold. As soon as ever I have finished this shawl I shall come and have a look at you. In the meantime you may nod your heads at the window as much as you like to tempt me, I cannot come." And she shook her own grey head at them, and hooked away at her shawl, her own heart of gold beaming with satisfaction at the pleasure in prospect. Presently her son came in.

"Well, mother," said he, "busy as ever ! I've just been visiting our invalid, and it is much better. I expect to see the little lady from The Homestead every minute. She said she would call this morning with her governess."

"Oh, indeed !" replied Mrs Falkner. "And what sort of a lady is the governess ? Jukes tells me there is a new one every week at The Homestead, and that the child is so thoroughly spoilt there is no doing anything with her. I pity the poor lady."

"Oh, I don't think this one is in need of pity," returned Mr Falkner in his most cheerful manner. "She seemed bright enough when I saw her yesterday. I only hope she will be able to stop with the Balfours. I consider her a trifle too good-looking for a governess."

"Handsome is as handsome does," sagely remarked the old lady.

"That is so ; but I always object to a handsome governess on principal. They have so many temptations and difficulties to contend against. I want you, mother,

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should she come with the little girl this morning, to take special notice of her. Her position in such a house as The Homestead must be very isolated. Besides that, one never knows what good may come of it. And in case of emergencies it would be a comfort to Miss Benson to feel that she had you as a friend to turn to."

Mrs Falkner looked up quickly from her knitting to scrutinise the tense, eager expression on her son's face. He coloured under the scrutiny, and to cover his embarrassment looked out of the window.

"Here they are!" he exclaimed suddenly, and there was no mistaking the pleasure in his voice as he added quickly, "I will send Miss Benson in to you whilst I take Winifred to see the fawn."

Mrs Falkner dropped her crochet in her eagerness to catch sight of the visitors as they were crossing the lawn. "Dear me! dear me!" she murmured, "what is this fancy about the new governess that is coming over him? He has talked of no one else since yesterday; and now, it seems, he wants me to befriend her. But she is decidedly a sweet girl to look at."

Little Winifred came running in at this moment, chattering away as she did so, and her mind full of her own importance.

"How are you, Mrs Falkner? I really have come to see you as well as the fawn, and I wanted so to tell you how good your son was yesterday in taking care of it for my sake. Is it better this morning?" She lifted her face to be kissed—a signal mark of favour which Mrs Falkner was not slow to appreciate.

"My pretty little pet," said she, affectionately, "what a sight you are for sore eyes! And is this Miss Benson? You are very welcome, my dear. I hope you did not find the walk too far for you?"

Meta blushed with pleasure at the cordial greeting and handshake, and thought that in all her life she had never met a sweeter or a more lovable old woman than

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this one. She seated herself on a low chair near Mrs Falkner's, and as soon as her pupil disappeared with the Vicar she entered into an easy conversation, confiding all her history, her duties at The Homestead, and the charming incident of her first drive there, which Meta could not refrain from referring to, especially as the relation of it called forth an enthusiastic approval from the devoted mother, who immediately imparted a long list of all her adorable son's virtues, charities and universal acts of kindness to everybody, which Meta, unknown to herself, was privately endorsing in her own heart as she listened.

"And now, my dear," continued Mrs Falkner, "you ought to do something for the parish. We are sadly in want of a Sunday-school teacher. Suppose you take a boy's class every Sunday morning at half-past ten? It would oblige the Vicar so much, as he has himself found it necessary to take this class in addition to his own at nine o'clock. He is terribly overworked."

Meta hesitated, wondering whether the Balfours would object; but then, remembering she had the entire disposal of the early morning to herself, she consented on the condition that the class should begin an hour earlier, as it would then give her ample time to take Winifred to Matins if she wished to go.

They were just arranging the ins and outs of this proposition when the Vicar returned, and it was immediately of course broached to him. He was delighted, and told Meta he would lose no time in considering her as one of the most promising of his parishioners—which speech made the girl intensely happy.

"But what have you done with my pupil?" said she. "She is such a responsibility. I am always thinking something dreadful will happen to her if she is out of my sight for a minute even."

"Oh, she is all right," replied Mr Falkner, laughing. "Her ladyship really commanded me to fetch you to see her new pet. So come now, or we shall be

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scolded for our tardiness." And he gaily opened the door for her to pass.

Together they crossed the lawn, and then took the garden path which led to the stables.

"I was telling your mother about the drive," commenced Meta, not wishing that he should be silent when alone with her.

"The drive!" he repeated, not understanding. "What drive?"

"Don't you remember?" she said softly; "you were so kind that day to an entire stranger like myself. I believe if it had not been for your friendly offer I should never have succeeded in closing with the Balfours. I am quite sure Mrs Balfour would never have engaged me if I had presented myself at The Homestead all muddy and untidy with my long walk from the station."

"They should have sent some sort of conveyance to meet you," hastily rejoined Mr Falkner.

"They fully intended to do so, but it was my fault. I stupidly omitted to say by what train I was coming."

"I am glad after all that they did not send for you," said the Vicar, inconsistently. "I should have missed doing you a service which gave me infinite pleasure."

He had barely said the last words when they found themselves near the shed where the wounded denizen of the forest had been carefully housed amid a lot of soft straw, and where it now lay stretched on Winifred's lap.

"Well, now, this is a goodly sight, little lady!" he exclaimed, changing his voice like magic, and assuming again his vicarial manner. "I have brought Miss Benson, you see, as you wished me to."

There was a queer look on Winifred's keen face; she had unluckily overheard his last words to Meta, and her curiosity was on the alert.

"Yes," she replied very gravely; "but you were a long time about it though. You were not in this instance deprived of doing *me* a service, which no doubt

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bored you rather than gave you infinite pleasure. But of course I am not a grown-up young lady like Miss Benson, and it makes all the difference."

"Oh, Winifred darling, how naughty!" exclaimed Meta, aghast.

Winifred tossed her head and laughed. "The fawn is much better," she said, changing the subject conveniently. "Mr Falkner thinks of letting it loose again, but I am going to ask papa to plead to the forester about letting me keep it as a pet. I should dearly love to have it for good." And she covered the animal's head with kisses.

"That would be delightful," said Meta, very much charmed with this idea. "It is almost like a young gazelle in its beauty. We shall tame it between us, Winifred, and make it follow us about in our walks."

Herein lay the secret of Meta's influence over spoilt Winifred. She never lost an opportunity of entering into all the child's innocent pleasures and making them part of her own. Her ready acquiescence pleased her pupil, and together they petted the graceful little creature, who, by way of showing its gratitude, licked their hands in return.

The Vicar stood by and watched them, his countenance half grave, half smiling. His large grey eyes rested on Meta, and when her left hand caressed the fawn's head he noticed the absence of the usual engagement ring. He seemed pleased at that. A great wave of feeling passed over him. This girl had interested him from the very first, and now circumstances had thrown her across his path he would be able to see much of her.

There was intense satisfaction in the thought; he would be able, he reflected, not only to help her in her spiritual life, but also to guard her from much harm.

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CHAPTER XV

MRS BALFOUR'S REVELATION

FOR some days following this visit to the Vicarage our heroine led an enchanted life ; she was pleased with herself, and pleased all around her by her infinite good-humour, which was mildly tempered, however, with a pretty air of dependence which sat well upon her and satisfied Mr and Mrs Balfour that she was not becoming spoilt by their generous treatment of her.

There was decidedly something very fascinating about High Beech, for Meta and her pupil contrived to find themselves there every morning, and never without a look into the Parsonage and an inquiry after Mrs Falkner, which of course brought them into contact with the Vicar, who made no secret of his pleasure in seeing them. She had consulted the Balfours about her intention of helping in the Sunday-school, and had met with no opposition from either. Mr Balfour had certainly sneered laughingly at the proposal. Bible-classes and Sunday-schools excited no sympathy in his atheistical breast, and he courteously winked at pretty young women who would undertake such work on the strength of winning a clerical husband. At least so he surmised. He bore several grudges against Miss Benson for the decided way in which she had repulsed his attentions. She had made it quite evident to him that his admiration of her was superfluous. He had been piqued in more ways than one, and in his innermost heart he felt hurt and angry. Yet he could make no just complaint ; she was as pleasant to him as she was to Rowland, who saw a great deal of her through Winifred's eagerness to see as much of her god-papa as possible.

Mr Balfour sought his guest, whom he found smoking on the terrace. To him he imparted the information

Mrs Balfour's Revelation

regarding Miss Benson's clerical bent, interlarding his discourse with many a joke and suspicion as to the real cause of it.

"She and Winifred," he added, "have been every morning to the Parsonage to see the fawn."

"To see the religious antelope, you mean. Winifred, I have no doubt, satisfies her mind that her new toy is all right, but Miss B. is otherwise engaged. By the way, Balfour, there is something distinctly charming about her—something *chic*, don't you know!" He looked at his friend and laughed.

"So the wind is blowing that quarter already, is it? Well, I have always considered my foresight unerring, and it seems that I am right. But she told me plainly that she has an unmitigated contempt for divorced men, so—" Balfour stopped and felt sorry he had said so much; he tried to turn it off with a laugh. "I told you how it would be, but you flouted at the very idea of falling a victim to the charms of Minerva. Well, and if she smiled at a coronet in preference to a biretta I don't blame her."

"Don't agitate yourself," said Rowland, quickly. "I am still heart-whole; and though Minerva is very charming and all that I am much too handicapped to make love to her." He hesitated, and coloured a little. "Does she know, think you, that I am a married man?" he asked presently, and waited eagerly for the answer.

Mr Balfour shook his head. "Winifred told me that she had repeated some words you had said to her about your wife being dead to you, and that Miss Benson seemed very much shocked at the child's want of feeling. I did not undeceive Winifred, and I fancy Miss Benson thinks you are a widower."

"Let her rest in that belief then," said Rowland, fervently. "There is no reason why she should be told about my domestic affairs. Perhaps you will do me a service by desiring your wife and sister to remain mute on that point."

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"Why?" asked Mr Balfour, somewhat suspiciously. "Do you not then intend to go on with the case?"

"Most certainly I do. Only it will in future be conducted *in camera*, so that the world will not be any the wiser about my life than they are now." He puffed away at his cigar and looked the picture of wisdom and contentment.

Mr Balfour seemed plunged in thought. The request did not at first please him; to have given such a promise implied more than he at first cared to permit. It meant that Rowland would once for all cut him out and put him at a disadvantage in his own house. Yet Rowland had a perfect right to demand secrecy where his affairs were concerned.

He gave the promise unwillingly, and wondered what would come of it. Somehow a prospect of amusement loomed before him. What if Meta should after all be tempted by the brilliant anticipation of a coronet, and, believing Rowland to be a widower, prefer him to the Vicar of St Mary's? What would be the outcome of such a possibility when she should discover the truth? The disappointment to herself would give him ample gratification for many a day—food for talk as well as mature reflection. He remembered their conversation that afternoon whilst riding in the forest, and the contempt she had expressed on divorce and for men in Rowland's position. Rowland would have no chance whatever in winning her good graces were she made aware of the true state of his domestic concerns. Indeed, he knew this, for every word Meta had uttered on that occasion had been repeated to him by his friend. Possibly Jack Rowland knew what he was about when he asked the favour of secrecy; he did not stop here, for he proffered his request to Mrs Balfour personally, in such a way as to ensure her good graces in his behalf.

A day or two before this the Balfours had issued invitations for a small dinner-party, and Meta was formally invited to be one of the guests.

Mrs Balfour's Revelation

"We want you to forget that you are the governess on this occasion," said Mrs Balfour, graciously. "Winifred will not appear at all. You will be quite free to do as you like after tea."

Meta thanked her and was about to leave the room when the lady stopped her. "Pray don't go," said she, with some animation. "There is something else I want to talk to you about."

"I know what it is," thought the girl, smiling. "She thinks I have no suitable attire, and she is going to offer me the present of a dress." She waited with an expectant look; proud as she was, she was not above accepting such a useful gift. She had quite made up her mind, if asked on the subject of colour, she should choose pink and cream." "A flowing China silk would be simply lovely."

A puzzled, pained expression passed over Mrs. Balfour's face; the same kind of look that we see on a child's who is afraid that she has not learnt her lesson well.

"You will understand, Miss Benson," she began after a while, "that Winifred is not to be troubled with religious ideas. Her father strongly objects to Mr Falkner's mode of teaching and his irregularities in the Church, and would not for one moment have countenanced Winifred's attending the children's services, but the child seemed so bent on going, and we never thwart her if we can possibly help it. Mr Falkner is a Ritualist." This was uttered very emphatically. "A Ritualistic clergyman is lawless in many respects, since he ignores his Bishop's authority, and as Winifred will one day occupy a very important position in Society we wish her to be brought up strickly orthodox. There must be no tampering with her Protestant education. These are Mr Balfour's own words, and I think I've done my duty as his wife and Winifred's mother to repeat them to you, for fear there should be any misunderstanding." Here the good lady paused; she had repeated her lesson well

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so far, but there lay in the background some further revelation.

In the meantime our heroine nursed secret resentment. She would have liked to contradict the disparaging remarks against one so truly good as Mr Falkner, but she dared not. So she swallowed her rage and remained prudently silent.

Presently Mrs Balfour began again, and with a heightened colour. "I ought to tell you something about this vicar whom you and Winifred seem to take such a fancy to. It may guard you especially against future unhappiness. It is a dreadful fact, I assure you, but I heard it on very good authority. He is—There! it is too dreadful for words." She broke off over-

come.

"He is what? What is he?" eagerly asked Meta.

"He is an avowed celibate—in other words, a Roman priest with a 'tonsil' on his head." Here was rank ignorance displayed by her mistress in describing any English clergyman as a Roman priest with "a tonsil on his head." Tonsure, of course, was the word Mrs Balfour had failed to use in her bewilderment, but it was all the same to Meta now. All the gladness and the hope and the longing to meet him again as a valued friend was gone, and she stood there silent, pale and disconsolate, ready to weep for very sorrow of soul. Mrs Balfour noted the pallor and felt sorry for her daughter's governess.

"Mr Rowland is right," debated she to herself. "It was quite time I did speak." Then aloud she said, in her kindest, laziest manner, "My dear, don't mind it so much; it seems quite the fashion for the clergy to go on in this lawless manner. Of course it is right for every minister of the Gospel to marry, just as it is more convenient to have a married doctor than an unmarried one. But there is no accounting for a Ritualistic clergyman's fads—the only wonder is that they are not really worse than they are with all their celibacy and nonsense."

A Select Dinner-Party

This seemed a consolatory idea to Mrs Balfour, and Meta took it as a hint of dismissal.

She returned to her own room, and there she wept out her grief—her grief was it? Her delusion let us say—the sad, unexpected ending to all her bright dreams—dreams such as a girl indulges in when she believes she has seen the man who may one day ask her to be his wife. Oh, the pity of it! The pity of it!

CHAPTER XVI

A SELECT DINNER-PARTY

MRS BALFOUR roused herself to a sense of her duty and took care that every detail connected with the above entertainment should be perfect and in good taste. They had not entertained much of late years; her chronic indolence was an obstacle to active gaieties of any sort. But now that Rowland had been for more than a week in the house and no party had been given in his honour as yet, a small dinner was considered advisable in order that Mr Falkner should be invited to The Homestead for the first time. His mother was included in the invitation, but declined on plea of infirmity. It was through her declining that Meta was asked to rectify the number. The other guests were Colonel and Mrs Pauncefote of Forest Leigh, with their son and niece. These, with the house party, made up the ten. The Pauncefotes were old friends of the Balfours, and occupied a first-rate position in the county. The Colonel was a tall, pompous-looking man, who prided himself on his ancient lineage and gloried in the laurels he had won on the field of Balaclava. He was amongst the first officers who received from her late Majesty's hand the Victoria Cross. He wore it now

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conspicuously on his breast, and was far prouder of this insignia of merit than many a Knight of the Garter of their blue ribbon.

It fell to Meta's lot to be coupled down to dinner with this grandee. In spite of Mrs Balfour's revelation in the preceding chapter she was disappointed, and so was Mr Falkner, whose fate it was to escort Miss Balfour, with whom he had no sympathy whatever, as she, like her brother, disliked the clergy. Our honourable friend, Jack Rowland, looking handsome and spruce as ever, escorted his hostess, and Mr Balfour led the way with Mrs Pauncefote—a portly lady, resplendent in green velvet and diamonds. Winifred described her afterwards as “the Queen of Sheba, only ever so much uglier.” Her son, Edmund Pauncefote, the only hope of the house, a young man of twenty-two, armed his cousin, a little blonde, fair-haired girl to whom he was engaged to be married. Miss Pauncefote was an heiress, and considered a splendid match, so the Colonel and his wife knew what they were about when they secured her for their son.

Meta sported a new dress for the occasion and looked exceedingly well, though a trifle pale. Since her disillusion of yesterday she had trained herself to composure and apparent indifference. In describing the interview to Rowland, Mrs Balfour had not exaggerated her suspicions that the girl had indeed already fallen a victim to Mr Falkner's clerical fascinations. “But now, of course,” she added, “she will think no more of him. It was kind of you to advise me to warn her. I am sure we have done her a good turn.” And Mrs Balfour really plumed herself on the fact.

Meta found herself seated between the Colonel and the Vicar.

“It is like having the Church and State one on each side of me,” she remarked in a low voice to the latter.

He laughed. “Both, I am sure, are at your service,” said he, cheerfully.

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"Rather, to be strictly orthodox, say that this lady is at the mercy of both," interpolated Colonel Pauncefote, overhearing the remark, and thinking in his own mind what a deuced pretty girl she was, and what a shame that she should be only the governess. Had she been a shade plainer he would have secretly resented having to take her down—for he was a proud man was the Colonel—but a lovely face went a long way with him, and Meta was looking lovely that evening.

"I am surprised at your want of gallantry, Colonel; had I such a remark made to me I should have immediately said that both Church and State were at the mercy of a fair lady."

There was a laughing ring of mischief in Rowland's voice; he seemed in high spirits.

"Hear, hear," said Mr Balfour, *sotto voce*. But Mr Falkner looked grave; he did not join in the well-bred laugh echoed round the table.

"I will reserve the orthodoxy of my words," said Colonel Pauncefote in his stateliest manner.

"And I confirm the spontaneous sincerity of mine," said Rowland, determined not to be beaten. He threw a soft, admiring glance on Meta, which hardened into a sneer, I am sorry to say, as his eyes caught sight of the Vicar's face.

"We must drink to the health of both Church and State as represented in the persons of our guests," said Mr Balfour, observing Rowland's look across the table, and interposing with his usual tact. "Pauncefote, old fellow, there is a world of meaning in that word 'orthodox.' Like the word 'Catholic,' it has caused more mischief in the country than the whole Established Church put together. Unless you wish to repeat the charge at Balaclava (where, I believe, you distinguished yourself), never make use of it outside your own demesnes—for I tell you it is dangerous." Mr Balfour doubtless spoke with some meaning, though every word had been uttered with apparent good-nature. But the

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Vicar was seen to colour up a good deal as he listened, and wondered what his host was driving at.

"You see what a storm in a tea-cup your remark has brought about," observed Rowland to Meta. "Take my advice and never say clever things if you can possibly avoid them."

Meta laughed. "I didn't know I had said anything clever. I only said how nice it is to be between Church and State."

"I trust, dear lady, you will never need the protection of either," said the Colonel almost tenderly.

"It all depends on the state I am in," said Meta.

The Colonel smiled.

Mrs Balfour looked encouragingly at her. She was pleased to see the girl in such good spirits. "After all," she thought, "she is not heart-broken about that celibate parson. She is much too sensible for anything of the kind."

Someone remarked about the Academy and the wonderful display of talent that special year. This caused a diversion; opinions varied on the subject.

"I detest the Academy," said young Pauncefote, who was not a patron of art. "Wouldn't go to the place if I had a free pass given me every hour of the day."

His affianced cousin, however, disagreed with him, and murmured something about the Academy being a sweet spot to dream in.

"I love 'Bubbles,'" she said softly. "I could sit by the hour and gaze at it. It puts me in mind of my own childhood's days when I used to play at bubbles with Pear's Soap."

"We shall have to call you 'Bubbles' then," said Mr Balfour, who had known her from an infant. "Though it is not a strictly elegant name for a young lady."

"Please don't," she returned, giggling very much like a schoolgirl. "The next thing is you will be asking me if I have used Pear's Soap."

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"I think it very much over-rated," laughed Rowland. "I prefer Vinolia for my complexion."

"How very vain you are!" said his hostess, languidly. It was the first and the only sentence she had uttered during the dinner so far.

Meta glanced at him approvingly. "How nice he is," she thought. "I had no idea he was so charming." Indeed, Rowland's unusual liveliness and *naïveté* were a new feature in his character.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating," remarked Colonel Pauncefote. "You may prefer Vinolia for yourself, though I must confess Marian's complexion makes a better advertisement for Pear's Soap than yours does for Vinolia."

"I thought it was for 'Bubbles,'" said Mr Falkner, smiling sweetly on the giggling little blonde, whom he knew very well as a member of his congregation.

"No, please don't, if you love me," she said entreatingly.

"But he doesn't love you. He had better not," affirmed young Pauncefote, gallantly.

"I should like Winifred to be painted for an advertisement picture of that kind," said Mrs Balfour. "Millais did see her and admired her very much, only he had already commenced his picture. But he is going to paint her portrait later on, and I think I shall send it to the Academy."

"Millais is a rare hand for child-beauty," said Mrs Pauncefote. "I remember his admiring Edmund when he was a dear little boy in velvet suit and Vandyke collar, with golden curls down to his shoulder. You never saw such a darling in your life!" She threw a proud glance on her blushing son and heir.

"Spare my feelings, mother," he exclaimed, "even if you should deny yourself a natural pleasure in doing so. Those golden ringlets you speak of were my special abomination. I recollect how teased I was about them by other little boys with short hair."

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"Ah, that was pure envy and jealousy," sighed Mrs Pauncefote, fondly. "I do so detest plain piebald children. I am so glad—"

"What is a piebald child like?" asked Rowland. "I have never seen one, or heard of one before."

"Nor have I," said Miss Balfour, laughing. "Can you mean a piebald pony?"

"Or a streaky magpie?" put in Marian Pauncefote with her usual giggle.

There was a general laugh, even Mrs Pauncefote good-naturedly joined in it. She saw she had spoken at random and therefore wisely let the subject drop.

"Talking of magpies," said Meta, "I saw two the other day."

"That portends a wedding," remarked Rowland. "Are you at all superstitious, Miss Benson?"

"Yes, very; I believe in things, don't you know?" And she coloured up becomingly.

"What things?" asked the Vicar, disapprovingly.

"The rule of thirteen," Rowland replied for her. "Quite right. It is only unpractical, uninteresting people who are not superstitious."

"I fancied it was the uneducated and ignorant," said the Vicar, raising his eyebrows.

"Would you fancy Miss Benson to be an ignorant person?" Rowland inquired mischievously.

Robert Falkner smiled sweetly on her. "You are undoubtedly the charming exception that proves the rule," he said.

She, however, bestowed her smile on Rowland who returned it with an ardent glance.

"He is a married man," thought Falkner, alarmed, "and he forgets himself."

"What a clerical nuisance!" pondered Rowland, noticing the sudden pallor of his *vis-à-vis*. "How any sensible girl with spirit can fancy a clergyman I can't understand!" There and then he felt he hated the parson, and resolved to cut him out clean in Meta's good

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graces. But he was prudent, however, for the rest of the dinner, and did not flirt across the table more than he could possibly help.

In the drawing-room the girl, at her hostess's request, stationed herself at the piano and played well. When the gentlemen rejoined them she saw Mr Falkner about to make his way to her, but Rowland, who had entered first, was already at her elbow, complimenting her on her beautiful music, and begging her not to leave off as he adored "sweet sounds."

"May I take a seat near you?" he asked, drawing a chair to the piano. Then he entered into a conversation about his favourite songs and composers.

He possessed a fascinating manner with women, and just now he was surpassing himself in the art of pleasing. Never before had he paid her such marked attentions. Meta listened to him with a frightened flutter in her heart, and wondered naturally enough if she had made a conquest. But no, it could not be; he was only making himself pleasant in order to kill time.

The Vicar of High Beech cast many an anxious glance on them; he was chatting with Mrs Pauncefote about the children's bean-feast that was soon to take place in Epping. Mrs Pauncefote plumed herself on being the Lady Bountiful of the parish, and dearly loved parochial talk.

"You seem very much interested in Miss Benson," said she, noticing one of these anxious glances of his. "She certainly is a very handsome girl, much too handsome for a governess—don't you think so?"

"She is undoubtedly a most accomplished woman," he answered evasively.

"I hear she is teaching in your Sunday-school? I am really surprised at that, for I don't think she has enough patience for that kind of thing. She seems much too giddy, in my opinion, for Winifred's governess. But Mrs Balfour speaks most highly of her. Though her opinion really, *entre nous*, is not worth much."

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"It is quite charming to see her and Winifred together," said Mr Falkner, gently. "I have seldom seen a child more properly and tactfully managed."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs Pauncefote, astonished. Like many others in the neighbourhood she had heard terrible reports of Winifred's unmanageableness. "Miss Benson must be really wonderful. She seems clever. How very evident is Mr Rowland's admiration of her! Do you not notice it?" she asked, preparing for a gossip, which her soul loved above all things.

Was Mr Falkner disposed to indulge her? At any rate he replied readily enough with another question.

"His wife, I presume, is not with him?"

"His wife!" repeated Mrs Pauncefote under her breath. "My dear Vicar, nobody ever talks about her! He has divorced her, or is going to divorce her. The Colonel told me something about it, and said it was a very shocking affair altogether. If she had been here he would never have allowed Marian and me to come. He is so strict, is the dear Colonel."

"Then do I understand that Mr Rowland is a divorced man?" demanded the Vicar, sternly.

"I really couldn't tell you," said the lady, with a virtuous air. "The dear Colonel never allows me to read divorce cases. He thinks it is so wrong to have them printed even in the papers. And I am sure he is quite right. I have always to be so careful about poor dear Marian reading things not meant for her in *The Daily Telegraph*, that invariably when I see her with the paper I say, 'Marian dear, let me have that for a minute,' and when the girl isn't looking I just separate the police and law news and give her the advertisement-sheet to look at, and she is quite happy. She is as good as gold, is Marian."

Mr Falkner warmly endorsed this eulogium; he had prepared Marian for confirmation a year or two ago, and had reason to be satisfied with her exceeding docility and gentleness.

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"Now I should not think Miss Benson at all like Marian," continued Mrs Pauncefote, placidly. "She looks like a girl with a temper, and she certainly must have a strong will of her own to go out as governess. I am told that her father is in a good position, but that she has a stepmother. I have no doubt there have been faults on both sides." She put up her lorgnette to inspect Meta.

Mr Falkner fidgeted on his chair and looked miserable.

"I wonder," said Mrs Pauncefote, putting down her gazer, "how long she will continue with the Balfours?"

"I hope a very long time for her own sake if not for Winifred's," replied the Vicar, fervently. How passionately he wished Rowland would leave her so as to give him a chance of conversing with her. But they seemed deeply engrossed in each other's company.

Just then the music ceased and Mrs Balfour asked Miss Pauncefote to sing. Meta immediately left the piano and took a seat in a distant corner of the room. He instantly left Mrs Pauncefote and came and sat near her. Rowland frowned and looked evidently displeased.

But they could not talk as long as the song lasted, though he felt great comfort in being near. She had smiled pleasantly on him, and this in itself was a distinct encouragement. So he waited somewhat impatiently for Marian's tra-la-la to come to an end, pondering the while as to whether he should warn her against Rowland or not. When the songstress ceased, Miss Balfour suggested that she must sing at the next local concert given in aid of charity.

Mr Falkner gently emphasised the remark by saying that the parish at that time was greatly in want of pecuniary help; there was so much poverty and sickness in the place, that if a concert could be got up it would prove indeed a considerable help. His hostess was seen visibly to shudder at the words "poverty and sickness," and in an aside to the Colonel murmured something about

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the "bad taste of the clergy" mentioning such "dreadful things" in Society.

Rowland, overhearing this, and determining to make a good impression, declared that it was a scandalous shame that such things should exist in an ideal parish like High Beech; but since poverty and sickness were rife there, and needed eradication, why, he had no objection to give a hundred-pound cheque to the Vicar for his parochial charities.

Mr Falkner thanked him effusively, and began to entertain a better opinion of him.

Mrs Balfour then interrupted further colloquy on this subject by asking Meta to give them a violin solo. "That Symphony in E minor, if you please, Miss Benson," said she; "it is so soothing to the nerves."

Meta gladly assented, proud of her triple accomplishments of piano, singing and violin, in all of which she knew she excelled much beyond the ordinary amateur. There was not one gentleman in the room but admired her graceful *pose* as she stood and handled this most difficult of all instruments. She played in perfect style, having received the best of training and instruction. When she had finished the soothing *morceau*, and had slightly inclined her head in response to the murmur of thanks and approbation, she met Mr Falkner's eyes gazing on her with a look—ah, well—a look which made her heart beat and sent the quick, hot blush to her cheeks. Her own drooped beneath his gaze. What could he mean by it? she asked herself. He, who was an avowed celibate, had surely no right to behave so.

Whilst she was engaged in putting away her violin in its case she was even more astonished to find him at her elbow asking if he could be of any help. "Your music," he said softly, "has been the most delightful thing I have heard for a long time. How pleased my mother would have been to have heard you! She is so passionately fond of it."

"Is she?" said Meta, sweetly. "I shall be very glad

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to come and play to her if you think she would really care for it. There is nothing I like so much as giving pleasure to other people."

She was almost sorry after she had made this speech ; it seemed as if she were fishing for more frequent invitations to the Parsonage ; and she had already been there too often, since seeing him so frequently had cherished the fond delusion that he cared for her, when such an idea possibly never entered into his calculations *if* Mrs Balfour's revelation was to be relied upon. She remembered her tears and the consequent heartache that followed, and she felt she could almost find it in her heart to hate him for having humiliated her in her own self-esteem. Falkner's appreciation of her kind offer to play to his mother was somewhat wet-blanketed by the sudden cold and haughty manner she assumed when he again seated himself beside her for the long-wished-for talk. A look of pain passed over his face, and he wondered how he had offended her.

"I am so glad you are happy here," said he, gently.

"Yes," she replied shortly, her eyes wandering to Rowland, who was then engaged in an exciting discussion about horse-betting with Colonel Pauncefote.

Falkner observed the glance with a sigh. "She is already fascinated by him," he thought. "But I must warn her of his doubtful position."

Aloud he said : "Mr Rowland is indeed very generous ; I am grateful to him for his cheque. It is a pity that he has not been more fortunate in his domestic life. I fancy he has many good qualities which would thrive happily in the genial atmosphere of home."

It was so natural of Robert Falkner to speak charitably of all men that the above remark seemed to Meta as though he were recommending Rowland to her special notice. At anyrate she understood it as such ; her face crimsoned deeply as she drew her own inference from the remark. "Does he suspect my love for him," flashed through her mind, "and therefore he wishes to

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turn my thoughts away from himself by praising up another man to my face. Oh, how low he must think I have fallen!" Pride and wounded feelings sustained her, and bravely she maintained her self-possession, assuming at once a manner cold and almost indifferent. She murmured something inaudible, and Falkner, gazing on her now pale, troubled countenance, felt it difficult to keep up the conversation, if conversation it can be called. "She is tired," he said to himself. "Possibly she has had a fatiguing day with Winifred. One must make excuses for a girl in her position." As he thus permitted himself to forget a certain resolution he had made some ten years ago, Meta, on the contrary, was constantly reminding herself of it in order to sustain the indifference of manner she found it so hard to put on for his benefit.

"How do you like your Sunday-school class?" he asked abruptly. "I hope you don't find it too much."

Meta shook her head. "No," she replied, "I like it. The children are all so good, except one boy, who was a little uncouth at first, but he soon improved."

"Which boy was that?" he demanded. It was his instant resolve to give the said culprit a severe talking to. She did not know that he had picked the very best boys for her class, and had promised one and all exceptional treats if they gave Miss Benson no trouble in teaching them their Catechism.

"Oh," said Meta, "a red-haired, freckled boy of some twelve years or so, called Jimmy Smith. He quite put me out last Sunday by whispering audibly to Tommy Clark that he believed I knew nothing at all about the 'cats.' 'There was too much of the kitten about me,' he added." And Meta laughed at the recollection of Jimmy's naughtiness.

"I shall have to give Jimmy a scolding. I quite thought he was the best boy in the school."

"He really is quite good now, so please don't scold him," she pleaded.

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Mr Falkner smiled. "I see you are inclined to be too indulgent. But I think the children are already very fond of you." There was not time for much more conversation. The Pauncefotes were taking leave of their host and hostess, and Meta had to rise with the others.

Mr Falkner bitterly regretted he had lost an opportunity of warning her against Rowland. He feared he had neglected an obvious duty. He inwardly resolved, however, to repair the omission on the very next occasion of her visit to the Parsonage. He would have her all to himself then without fear of interruption.

Meta's conscience smote her as she said good-bye to him. She had not been kind, she felt, but then he was a celibate and proof against woman's kindness. What did it matter if she was good to him or not? It was a shame to waste her smiles on the desert air; she could never be anything more to him than a mere friend.

END OF BOOK II.

BOOK III

CHAPTER XVII

THE LINKS THAT BIND

"If he is not fair or good to me,
What care I how good or fair he be?"

SUCH were the burden of Meta's thoughts regarding Falkner. The days that followed the dinner-party were days of exquisite pleasure, for they were passed in the almost constant companionship of Jack Rowland. He accompanied them in all their walks and rides. This was, of course, at Winifred's request. The trio had delightful gallops in the forest in the early hours of the morning; so early sometimes that Rowland laughingly declared the sound of their horses' hoofs roused the sleeping birds and disturbed the deer from their lair. But the fact of such early intrusions did not in the least detract from their enjoyment of this healthy exercise, and as long as Winifred was happy and amused, Mr and Mrs Balfour made no objection to these matutinal flittings. Thus was Meta daily and almost hourly thrown into Rowland's society, and she revelled in it, her personal vanity was gratified by his open admiration; and his attentions were rendered all the more acceptable by his delicate manner in offering them. She had now completely conquered her former dislike of him. Her visits to the Parsonage were ostensibly made to Mrs Falkner only. She contrived to call there when Mr Falkner was either holding a service in the little church or busy on a round of parochial visits. She would have avoided having speech with him entirely if she could have

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managed it without exciting remark ; but this was impossible, for spoilt Winifred, in her sudden fancy for the Vicar's company, insisted on Meta accompanying her to the Parsonage as frequently as ever.

It was hard, at first, for Meta to give up thinking of him ; the more so because each effort to banish him from her mind inspired only a greater desire to see him. The sight of him caused her pain. It put her in touch with all these fond dreams she had indulged in, where he—her lover, she fancied—stood prominent. She could never love anyone again as she had loved Robert Falkner. She knew that, and the knowledge at times made her hate him. He had humiliated her in her own self-esteem, he had won her love unasked ; whether he had deliberately sought it or not was another matter ; she was inclined to think that he had, and that it was the sudden remembrance of his intention never to marry that had caused him to change his manner. Meta paused here to think otherwise and with some justice to the object of her thoughts. No, it was she who had changed towards him, who avoided him whenever she could. A man who had declared himself married to the Church was not the sort of lover she cared to have. But so many men had made the same promise and had broken it, and were none the worse for doing so. She had actually come across such men, and they were excellent husbands and their wives the happiest of women. As she probed her mind even deeper, she felt that pride and ambition—two very powerful factors in this case—had been the mainspring of this growing preference for Rowland. Rowland could give her all a vain woman's heart could desire—such a position in the great world as might fall to the lot of a duke's daughter. She would be foolish indeed if she snubbed him on Falkner's account. The wonder of it all was that the Balfour ladies allowed her so much advantage in their household as to throw a future coronet into the lap of a governess. This was a new experience to Meta. In all

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her former engagements young men of any position were carefully removed from coming into contact with her charming personality. She had been treated as a dependant and carefully confined to her duties in the schoolroom. But here at The Homestead Mrs and Miss Balfour made no objection to their guest going in and out as he pleased and enjoying the society of their governess as much as ever he liked. They made no remark whatever ; in short, they carefully refrained from saying anything either to each other or to Meta. It was no business of theirs, so long as Winifred was not neglected. Mrs Balfour had become fond of the girl ; she appreciated her music and availed herself of it whenever so inclined. She had no conscience, and therefore allowed Miss Benson to imagine that she was on the high road to become a peeress of the realm.

About a week after the dinner-party old Mrs Falkner called at The Homestead. It was late in the afternoon ; the Balfours and their guest, with Meta and Winifred, were having tea on the terrace. The latter was the first to see and hear the familiar Parsonage turn-out coming down the drive, and in her impulsive way rushed forward to meet the visitor.

Jukes stopped the carriage at her bidding, and Winifred, without any ceremony, led her to the group on the terrace.

Mr Balfour, with his never-failing courtesy as a host, advanced to receive her, and the rest were equally friendly in their welcome.

"I am very glad to see you," said Mrs Balfour, languidly, when Mrs Falkner was settled comfortably in a wicker garden chair and she had noticed for the first time how sweet and gentle the old face was.

Since Winifred's championship of the Falkners and the extraordinary fancy she had taken to them, Mrs Balfour was perforce inclined to regard them in a more friendly light. Therefore, her smile, as she shook hands with her visitor, was really spontaneous and not feigned.

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"We were so sorry," she added graciously, "that you could not come to us last Thursday."

"It was such a grand dinner-party," put in Winifred, before Mrs Falkner could answer. "They would not have me appear at all, so I peeped from the top of the staircase and saw everything quite nicely. Meta looked perfectly lovely, and not a bit like a governess; it was worth while coming to see her, I can tell you, let alone the good things to eat."

"You little pet!" said Mrs Falkner, affectionately, whilst the others laughed. "It is worth while coming a long way to see you, I think." Then addressing Mrs Balfour she explained how her rheumatism had prevented her from accepting so kind an invitation, and that keeping warm in bed was the only good thing for it.

A long discourse then followed from her hostess on nerves and the agony of nervous prostration, which were infinitely more painful than any other complaint in the world, at least so Mrs Balfour said, and her visitor listened patiently and sympathetically. She knew well that this was a part of the programme to be expected when visiting The Homestead and its mistress, so she gave an attentive ear, and reserved her own private opinion. She even ventured so far as to *advise* Mrs Balfour—a thing no one had ever cared to do, knowing what a useless waste of breath it would have been. "Fresh air and change of scene" were prescribed by the old lady, who would have added, "and plenty of physical exercise too," but she refrained. She had come to propitiate, therefore she put aside her prejudices, and being naturally diplomatic and tactful, she commenced to show them what a charming old woman she was, until everybody present felt quite at their ease, and they were all talking in the most friendly manner imaginable. Even Rowland, lounging away there in a loose suit of white flannels and straw hat, thought her a very "decent old party," and got his friend Balfour to intro-

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duce him. It was his intention also to make himself thoroughly popular with everybody, and he fancied that he would not lose by making a good impression on Mrs Falkner.

They had been discussing a four-in-hand drive to London. It had been arranged that Rowland should drive the whole party to his house in Kensington, where they would be regaled with luncheon. Mrs Falkner was invited to join them, but declined with a merry laugh.

"I should like to see myself perched up on the top of a coach," she said. "No, no ; such things are only for young and pretty women," and she involuntarily glanced at Meta, who had been very silent throughout the general hubbub.

"Well, my dear, and when are you coming to play to me again ?" she asked affectionately.

True to her promise to Mr Falkner, Meta had carried her violin on one occasion to the Parsonage and played her favourite symphonies to a very appreciative audience of one.

Before Meta could reply, Mr Balfour laughingly interfered, saying that it was the intention of everyone interested in Miss Benson's music to go uninvited to the Parsonage next time the violin was carried out of the premises. "It is but fair that we should be present, Mrs Falkner, for really and truly we cannot afford to lose any sweet sounds that might be had for the asking. Besides, my wife and sister are most anxious to be on a sociable footing at the Parsonage."

Now this was a remarkably friendly speech, though greatly lacking in accuracy ; it immediately set at rest any doubts Mrs Falkner may have had as to the cordiality they intended for the future to entertain towards the Vicar of High Beech and his mother. The Balfours had certainly repulsed a close acquaintance hitherto, but seemed now anxious to make up for their neglect by holding out amicable overtures.

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Therefore Mrs Falkner, who was the soul of hospitality and good-nature, delightedly acquiesced with Mr Balfour's hint and said that she hoped she would not be disappointed when the time came for them to accept an invitation to the Parsonage. Soon after she took her leave, and the conversation about the four-in-hand was again resumed and every arrangement made for it to take place on the morrow. Tea being over, Mrs and Miss Balfour rose, the latter to write some important letters, and the former, it need scarcely be said, to her usual rest before dinner.

Little Winifred was gambolling about the garden with her fawn, the same pretty creature she and her beloved Mr Falkner had saved from an untimely death.

Meta rose also from her seat and joined her pupil.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Your love is a prescience of evil,
I feel it so in this deathly chill."

WINIFRED and the fawn at play made a pretty picture ; the creature knew and loved her so well now that it would come at her call and be as obedient as a well-trained dog. It answered to the name of Moussa, an appellation which its little mistress thought appropriate, on account of some former gazelle in a fairy story having borne that name. She was so devoted to her small pet, and so anxious for its welfare, that she could scarcely bear it out of her sight. To warn her against such intense affection, Meta had related to her the incident in *Lalla Rookh* when Hinda complains of her unhappy lot.

Your Love is a Prescience of Evil

“Oh ! even thus from childhood’s hour,
I’ve seen my fondest hopes decay ;
I never loved a tree or flower,
But ’twas the first to fade away.
I never nursed a dear gazelle,
To glad me with its soft black eye,
But when it came to know me well
And love me it was sura to die.”

Meta’s stock of stories were exhausted, and she relied on the brains of others for amusing her pupil. The child had learnt off the above lines by heart, and she was frequently heard repeating them to Moussa, who listened intelligently until the last line, when with a cry the animal bounded away, manifesting by every play of its graceful limbs that there was not the smallest apprehension of its dying just yet, however fond Miss Winifred may be.

It was Meta who was now repeating these lines in her clear sweet voice as she came up to the little frisking youngsters, and she was visibly startled by hearing a continuation of the poem by someone behind her :—

“Now too, the joy most like divine,
To see thee, hear thee, call thee mine,
Oh, Misery ! must I lose that too ?”

She turned, and found Rowland beside her.

“Please forgive me,” said he, with mock humility, as he raised his straw hat, “but *Lalla Rookh* is such a favourite of mine that I could not help giving vent to my own feelings in sympathy with poor Hinda’s.”

“Oh, that is nothing !” said Meta, blushing, and trying not to look confused. “But it was really to warn Winifred, lest she should experience a like disappointment.”

“Are you always anxious to save others from experiencing disappointment ? For, if so, let me also share your solicitude.”

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"I don't think you need saving," laughed Meta. "How can such a fortunate person as yourself know what disappointment is? But I am glad you are an admirer of *Lalla Rookh*. It is certainly very beautiful."

"It is my favourite poem. I think there is nothing to equal it in the English language for pathos, humour and simplicity. I must to-morrow show you my group of *Lalla Rookh* pictures. I had a series of them painted by ——" (naming a well-known artist), "and they have been very much admired. The parting of Hinda and her lover is exceptionally beautiful; you will admire it, I think. You do not know how I am looking forward to the pleasure of entertaining you in my house."

He threw her an ardent glance.

"You are very good," said she, assuming an indifference she did not feel, "and I am quite prepared to enjoy everything I shall see there. I suppose your sister keeps house for you?—or perhaps, like Mr Falkner, your mother does the honours of it when you have company?"

He laughed. "I have no sister, and my mother is dead. I don't think you will note the want of either when you come to it."

His voice gave her the impression that she had made a mistake in fancying his household at Kensington Palace Gardens was conducted on the same lines as the Parsonage. She felt she had committed herself and blushed at the thought. "What an unsophisticated ignoramus he will think me! But it feels quite exciting to flirt with him."

Had she cared to indulge in further reflection she would have felt also that the excitement was dangerous and would bring her no good, but she was young and two-and-twenty, and flirtation at that age is hard to resist with most women.

"No," he continued complacently, admiring her all the more in her pretty embarrassment, "my mother

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died when I was a small boy at Eton. My father and an uncle or two are the only living relatives that I have. We Rowlands do not deal in large families. The governor, however, is always anxious that I should have an heir to succeed to the estates. Like all old men it is but natural that he should desire to see his children's children before he dies."

"You have no children, then?" she asked, secretly wondering why he was thus confiding his family affairs to her.

At her question a gloomy look came over his face—a look that blackened it and made it almost ugly for the time being.

"My marriage was a failure—a cursed failure!" he replied, and there was a ring of suppressed fury in his voice which startled Meta. "I wish it had never been—it has all but ruined my life. It is the fault with very young men to marry on impulse; to be persuaded into a marriage of convenience merely for the sake of pleasing their relatives. My father had more to do with the choosing of my bride than I had. Thus it happened that it turned out badly for both of us. She, the woman who was once my wife, is not one whom I would willingly speak of to you, who are so innocent, so sweet, so pure. Nor would I care that you should ask about her." He paused and looked at her.

"I am sorry for you," said Meta, wincing under his passionate gaze. "If I can do anything to make you happy and forget your trouble whilst you are at The Homestead, please let me."

"How sweet, how kind you are, Meta!" The name came out spontaneously from his lips and it startled her. She turned her face away as if she had not heard, and called out some trivial request to Winifred; she was about to rejoin her pupil, when he held her back with these words:—"Please forgive me; you do not know how much you dwell in my thoughts as Meta; it is such a tender, simple name. Will you pardon me if I seem

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to have taken a liberty?" His voice, the pleading cadence of which vibrated on every nerve in her body, revealed to her his passion; all the youth and desire in her nature seemed to call forth a response. In her momentary triumph of winning such a lover she forgot Falkner, or that she ever cared for him; in Rowland she saw the conquest of love, wealth and rank, and her coquetry was not proof against such; but, womanlike, she hesitated before surrendering.

"You have not taken a liberty," she said in reply. "If you really care for me you shall call me Meta in your thoughts, and when we are alone." The last words were scarcely audible. She was consenting to a secret attachment, and she knew it. But there seemed no other resource; the prospect of having a private understanding with him had in it a fascination all delightful, and she yielded to the temptation.

A lurid flash of pleasure passed over his face, and under cover of some trees (for they were walking down a gravelled path in the garden) he snatched her hand and pressed it passionately to his lips.

"I love you," he said. "My heart went out to you the first time I saw you in the shrubbery, where you seemed hiding as it were from someone. I felt then that there was some fatal affinity between us, that I should see the white lady again, and know her, and come to love her as my fate."

As he was speaking a violent chill seemed to come over Meta—a cold, benumbed feeling, filling her with a sense of intense discomfort and misery. With a gesture of repulsion she snatched her hand from him, and her trembling lips stammered out,—

"I can't know what I am about, Mr Rowland; I have forgotten myself. I forget that my short acquaintance with you does not permit me to accept your declaration as a lover."

"Forget that I have been in heaven, and that you are now driving me to hell by your caprice," he replied

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astonished, yet thinking all the more of her by her repulsion of his untimely advances. "No, that can never be again, sweetheart. Why, I seem to have known you all my life. For the last three weeks I have been constantly in your society, drinking in your words, the magic of your voice, the beauty of your face, and the light of your eyes, which all but shone with love a minute ago when I told you I loved you. What made you repulse me all at once when I was speaking of my first sight of you in the shrubbery? Was it a ghost, or was it the thought of someone else?"

"No, no," replied Meta, quickly, and shivering violently again. "It was not a ghost, it was not the thought of anyone else. Only a deathly chill, like the foreboding of some evil in connection with your love for me—a chill and a heartfelt fear that it is better for me not to listen to you. Let us go in, Mr Rowland. I am cold; and it is time Winifred had her practice."

"Wait one moment," said he, pleadingly. "Will you promise to give me time to speak to you again? I feel now that I have been too precipitate. Please look upon me always as your friend—a devoted, sincere friend willing to do you any service in my power. Oh, Meta, be kind to me; I love you, I love you so fondly and so truly."

"Yes, yes," she replied hastily, "you are too good, too kind and patient. I shall always try and think well of you." Then, raising her still unsteady voice, she called to Winifred.

"Child," she said, "how tired and hot you look!"

"And how white and cold you are!" retorted Winifred, somewhat cross at being called away so sharply. "One would think you had been to the Debatable Land to see the White Lady of Avenel and she had been telling you something nasty about your future. Perhaps that you will have a bad husband who will drink and gamble, and children who will be ugly and stupid and a burden to you. Now confess, god-father, speak the truth and shame the devil. What have you two

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been talking about behind the trees? I saw you kissing her hand, although you thought I did not. If little pitchers have long ears they have good eyes as well." And the little sprite laughed wildly at the evident embarrassment of her elders.

"Oh, hush, hush, Winifred, how you shock me!" said Rowland, reprovingly. "A lady in your position of life should never repeat what she has accidentally seen. It is not good form to do so. Promise me now that you will not be naughty; see how uncomfortable you have made Miss Benson feel."

"She was white a minute ago, now she is red. I hope when I am grown up I sha'n't be so foolish as to change colour so often during the day. It just shows that she is not quite sure what colour would best suit her. But she is a darling old Meta for all that, and I sha'n't say anything naughty again until next time." And she ran away with the pet fawn at her heels, and Meta following as hastily as her dignity and confusion would allow.

CHAPTER XIX

HIS VOW OF CELIBACY

"AND so, mother, your visit to The Homestead was a success, and you really had a cordial reception? I am indeed glad to hear it. We shall hope now for frequent and generous subscriptions to our local charities; also for the occasional appearance of the family in their pew on a Sunday morning. That empty bench of the Balfours has always been an eyesore to me."

It was after the half-past six dinner; that comfortable meal over, the Reverend Mr Falkner had seated himself outside the French windows facing the drawing-room,

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prepared for a quiet enjoyment of the cool evening air, and a pleasant chat with his mother, who, afraid of rheumatism, contented herself to remain within, sheltered from all draughts and treacherous dews. She was as usual busy with her crochet, but not so busy as to prevent her throwing many a loving glance on him. There was an anxiety surging in her heart as to his looks, which had been none of the best lately. He was decidedly looking very pale and very jaded. Others in the parish besides his mother had remarked this.

"Such a pity you were not with me, Robert," she was saying in reply. "To be sure, Mrs Balfour is too lazy to visit much, and they are rather a proud and exclusive set, but we ought somehow to have got to know them."

"Why," said Mr Falkner, laughing, "I think if I have called there once I have called there a dozen times, and they have always been 'not at home' to me. It is only lately that we have ever had a chance given us to cultivate their acquaintance."

"Through Winifred and her gazelle," said Mrs Falkner, thoughtfully. "It just shows how wise Providence is in bringing great events out of trifles. That pert child has a wonderful influence over her parents. I wonder what she will grow up like?"

"I wonder!" echoed Mr Falkner, gravely.

"But she is vastly improved, I am told, since Miss Benson has had the management of her. By the way, my son, that young lady has already found an admirer in the Honourable Mr Rowland, who is staying there. I caught him many a time looking at her as only a lover can look. But, gracious me, Robert, what has taken you? Why do you start from your chair like that?—just as if someone had struck you," added she, much alarmed.

"It is nothing, mother," returned Mr Falkner, hastily. "A horrid earwig crawling on my sleeve. You know how I hate earwigs!" But his lips were

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very white, and if his mother's sight had not been so dim she would have noted the blank, miserable expression of his eyes and the excessive pallor of his handsome, grave face.

"Have you killed it?" she demanded anxiously. "Are you sure it is not crawling away from you only to eat up my flowers? They are the plagues of the garden." Then, satisfying herself that the earwig had undergone instantaneous death from the sole of the vicarial boot, she continued in her cheerful, smooth strain, still plying busily with the hook, and only too glad to have a listener to her prosy, harmless gossip to mind whether the subject she had at heart was a welcome one or not.

"Yes, I think there must be something in it. And it was all so very open and aboveboard; even the Balfours must have noticed it. His father is a viscount, I hear, and he is the only son and heir. Dear me! how lucky the girl will be if it should come to anything. But there's many a slip between cup and lip, and I for one would wish her something quite different—a quieter and more protected life, where she would not have to face so many temptations."

"My dear mother, you seem very sure of everything. You are probably ignorant that this Mr Rowland is a married man. He certainly has been seeking a divorce from his wife, but whether he will get it is another thing. It seems to me that his own life will not stand much looking into." Mr Falkner spoke with an effort, but there was an unmistakable note of pain in his voice which was not lost on the sensitive ears of his mother.

She had dropped her work on her lap as she listened with wide-open eyes and hands raised in consternation. "To think of it! To think of it!" she exclaimed. "But what can the Balfours be dreaming about to allow a married man to take such liberties with their child's governess? And they treat her in every way as if she were one of themselves."

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"Perhaps you are mistaken as to the extent and meaning of Mr Rowland's feelings for Miss Benson?" interpolated the Vicar with his habitual charity. "He might admire her and all that, you know. I don't see how any man with eyes can help doing so. But to entertain serious intentions would be a breach of honour; and Miss Benson herself, if she is aware of his position, and if she is the woman I take her to be, would scout any such conduct on his part as an insult. But do not let us discuss it any further," he added, with a sigh of intense weariness; "I do so cordially detest gossip."

He sat back on the garden-chair; the dusky light half hid the sadness of the face as it was turned upwards.

Mrs Falkner watched him with a vague sensation that she had unwittingly caused him pain by what she had said of Meta and Rowland. It had sometimes occurred to her that her son was himself deeply interested in the young lady. She had always put aside the insistent thought, knowing as she did his determination never to marry. But was he indeed seriously thinking of changing his mind and absolving himself from that solemn vow of celibacy he had taken on his ordination as deacon sixteen years ago? She scrutinised his pensive countenance closely, and fondly hoped that he would indeed relinquish a promise which she had never approved of, and live as others of his brethren did, with wife and children and home.

Nothing broke the long silence between them but the twittering of the birds who had built their nests in the snug Parsonage trees, and who, with their customary fluttering and cheeping, were wishing each other a hearty "Good-night." A lark soaring high above them sent forth brilliant strains of melody—such melody as filled the heart of Robert Falkner with a dull, thudding sense of longing for a fuller, happier existence.

"It is not meet for man to be alone," he said to himself insistently; "even the very birds are mated, and why should not I? Love is the fulfilment of God's law—

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love and marriage. Can human vows break that commandment?"

He looked around for the answer timidly. His soul cried out to God for help; for he was in sore straits. All Nature seemed in peace but the nature within him. His mother's reference to Meta and Rowland had roused some latent chord; the very thought that he would lose her love by his enforced silence, hemmed in as he was by the religious sentiment that swayed him, caused him the deepest pain and melancholy. If he cancelled that promise, and declared his love for her in the face of all the coldness and evident indifference she had assumed, would she accept him? There was still hope to buoy him up in spite of his rival's existence. He fancied her to be high-souled enough to prefer his love when once she knew of Rowland's doubtful position.

Suddenly an impulse moved him, and before Mrs Falkner was aware of his intention he had left his seat, and with quick, rapid strides was making his way to his study. It was a long, low apartment, plainly furnished, and its walls lined with rows and rows of studious-looking books. A lighted lamp was already placed on the large writing-table in the centre of the room, and as he entered, he carefully shut the window and drew down the Venetian blinds, as though shutting out all intrusion from the outside world.

There was a look of purpose on his face: a look which plainly indicated that he had come there to settle his mind about something, and the sooner it was done the better.

He produced from his pocket a bunch of keys and commenced to unlock the centre receptacle of his *escritoire*. The small key which fitted the inner lock was rusty from want of use: it had not been opened for more than sixteen years, and it creaked ominously as he turned it and pulled out the secret drawer, which now discovered piles and piles of neatly-docketed papers, arranged with precision and care. Each packet bore the

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date of the year in which he was ordained deacon. With the exception of one they were all memorandums, relating to his life during that period. There was a special roll of paper which was not a memorandum, and this was what he had come to re-examine. He took it up from the rest, reading the inscription and pondering over it. Then slowly, almost reluctantly, yet with a passionate gesture, he unrolled it, and set himself to reading its contents.

It was just an outpouring, fervid in its intensity, of a soul zealous in the cause of good, and for that very cause willing to sacrifice the unknown future. It was written on the very day of his ordination as deacon, and it reflected clearly the then state of his mind.

He stared at it blankly, at first barely understanding its purport; then recollections, quick and vivid, of the past came back to him, and he sat thus reading it over and over again as though trying his utmost to realise that he himself had penned these burning words, and that to keep his promise now would mean an annihilation of all his hopes of happiness.

Then suddenly, as though to relieve his troubled thoughts, he commenced to write. It was a vent the throbbing brain appreciated, for he was now seeking comfort and advice from one whom he had every reason to reverence—a personal friend in no less a man than the Bishop who had prepared him for the Church. In this letter he betrayed the passion of his soul without reserve, making it very clear to his correspondent that he considered the promise had already been broken in thought, but on no account would he ignore the entire keeping of it without grave deliberation.

“Give me,” he wrote, “your impartial, conscientious advice; if you think that it is necessary that I should

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keep it for honour's sake, I will endeavour my best to abide by your decision.

"Here in my parish they all know of my intention; I have preached it from the pulpit often enough; I should not, however, like my parishioners to think that my preaching has been in vain, and that in spite of my position as their priest I am ready to go from my word at the first temptation.

"Advise me for the best, my dearest friend and counsellor, and before you put pen to paper read carefully the script I enclose; it will help you to understand the difficulty I am in."

He sealed both letter and enclosure, addressed and stamped it, then rang the bell and desired the maid to post it. There was still time for the evening collection, and the anxiety was off his mind. He had literally shifted the responsibility from his own shoulders to those of another, and he felt sure he had done right.

There was also an instinct of certainty in the knowledge that the reply would be such as would restore him his peace of mind, and secure him his much-desired happiness.

He now gave himself up to that pleasant introspection habitual to one of his nature; and as he deemed the coming event a turning-point in his life, he set himself to the task of analysing the strength of his passion for Meta, and praying inwardly that when the moment came for him to speak she would be found a responsive listener to his suit.

The recollection of her studied coldness to him at The Homestead dinner, and subsequently, when meeting her at church and elsewhere, excited a fear that perhaps after all he had staked too much on her possible answer—and disappointment might be in store for him.

A groan escaped him at the thought, and the recent conversation with his mother gave him an additional

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pang. What if Rowland's rank, wealth and position carried the day in spite of the stigma of his divorce !

Perish the thought ! he believed in her purity of mind too implicitly to encourage the notion of a possible rival in Rowland.

The morning of the second day brought him the expected reply from the Bishop. It was couched in the following terms :—

“Your letter, my dear Falkner, is what I should expect from one so conscientious and truthful ; and you have done right in submitting the matter to me.

“I have read the script you enclosed, and can understand the delicacy you feel in the matter.

“Let me tell you that such a promise is never binding in the English Church, and that you are at liberty to set it aside whenever you consider it advisable for your happiness so to do. A man's private resolutions, however sincerely made, can scarcely be treated as a vow, and you were much too young to realise the full extent of the obligation (if obligation there be).

“In your present dilemma you are justified in wishing to discard it. Marry, my dear Falkner, by all means ; the Church of England owes her strength and purity to the non-celibacy of her clergy, and you would be wrong, decidedly wrong, to smother your natural feelings of affection for the sake of a religious sentiment that no longer exists. I for one shall be glad to meet the young lady, whom I consider very lucky to have won your love ; and if I can manage it, I should greatly like to bind you both in the knot that no earthly power can sunder.

“My congratulations to you ; and may God bless you and give you your heart's desire.

“*P.S.*—I have destroyed the paper ; it only remains for you to forget that you ever wrote it.”

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CHAPTER XX

"AMOR VINCIT OMNIA"

THE four-in-hand drive had been accomplished in perfect satisfaction to all: it had been a source of infinite pleasure and novelty to Winifred and her governess; the former especially, as to her had been given the honour of the box-seat, where she occasionally imperilled the lives of all concerned by insisting on holding the ribbons and guiding four of the finest and most spirited steeds in London.

Even Mrs Balfour roused herself to enjoy it, though she confessed to physical exhaustion on her arrival in Kensington and the necessity to rest after luncheon.

Rowland had ordered everything essential for his guests' comfort and convenience, and showed himself in every way a host in a thousand. Never before in his whole life had he felt so unduly proud of possessing so fine a house—the mere fact that the glories of it would be more or less a dazzling temptation to Meta made his heart beat high with hopes of her final surrender.

And now, witness the state and splendour of the four-in-hand coach as the horses are drawn up in front of the town mansion, and the liveried flunkeys throng forward to receive their master and his guests. Here is the marble hall where his discarded wife had accosted him; and there is the noble library where he had granted her the interview she sought. If only the walls could have cried out the past history of scenes they had witnessed, and revealed to poor deluded Meta the real facts of her lover's life now, she would have shrunk from him; what rage would have filled her heart to think that she should be dishonoured in thought even by any man!

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But there is a natural gratification to her woman's pride as she looks around the magnificence of such a home and thinks that it lies in her power to be mistress of it all, and to reign in it supreme queen ! Rowland is so nice, so charming to her too ; his manner is simply perfect, so free from all ostentation or snobbishness, and so desirous to please everybody, including Winifred, who is indeed very troublesome. But he manages this latter with exquisite tact, taking good care that she should not give Meta any trouble. Winifred has *carte blanche* to run over the whole house at her sweet will, to ransack everything, and to amuse herself in any way that best suits her.

It was during luncheon that this permission had been granted her, and she availed herself of it without loss of time. As soon as that sumptuous repast is over, Rowland has proposed to show Meta over the gallery and reception rooms ; and Mrs Balfour expresses herself deserving of her afternoon siesta, and retires accordingly into an apartment specially prepared for her. Adelaide and her brother start to make duty calls ; and therefore Rowland has his heart's wish gratified, and that is the quiet possession of Meta's society undisturbed in his own house.

“It seems to me,” said Meta, who is not at all put out by this arrangement, but rather likes it, for she is naturally fond of a great deal of notice and attention, “that you have planned this day's enjoyment specially for my benefit. I feel anticipative of great treats, so mind you play the part of showman well.” And she laughed merrily as she followed him up the grand staircase into the ante-chamber which opened into the long and exceeding beautiful gallery, replete with statuary and pictures of the most costly description.

“I am going to,” was his laughing reply. “I have done nothing for the last day or two but think of this pleasurable duty in store for me ; and now that I have you all to myself I am going to begin.” He stopped

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before a large full-length portrait of a tall, stately-looking man dressed in his peer's robes, with his coronet lying on a crimson velvet cushion : a splendid figure of a man of noble mien and commanding presence. It is the first picture they come to, and it is placed in a very conspicuous position in the gallery. Meta looks inquiringly at it and then glances at Rowland. "It is my father," he explained. "It was painted a little more than thirty years ago, when he had this gallery built. He looks very different now. He has aged so for the last ten years and is a chronic invalid."

"I am sorry," said Meta, sympathetically. "How you resemble him in form and features ! The likeness is extraordinary !"

Rowland coloured with pleasure. He knew that in the old days, when his father was a young man, there was not another peer to be compared with him in the House of Lords for beauty and nobility of presence ; and he was his father's son, every inch of him.

"Now show me your *Lalla Rookh* group," said Meta, when she had sufficiently admired the Viscount, and thought in her heart what a fine thing it would be to be the wife of such a grandee's son. "I am so wishful to see what Hinda looks like. Oh, how beautiful !" she cried, as only a few steps further on she is brought face to face with the pictures in question.

One after another they are *chefs d'œuvres* of the painter's brush, and have the touch of genius in them that is unmistakable.

Rowland watches her animated countenance whilst he takes her from one to the other and explains to her the history of each.

"They are too exquisite for anything," said she, delightedly. "What an imagination the artist must have to depict Hinda as she is there on the canvas ! I have never seen anything to equal the loveliness of her face."

"I have," said Rowland, boldly, "and that is yours." He took her hand, unreprieved by her, and kissed it.

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“You are a thousand times lovelier to me,” he said, “for there is soul and intellect imprinted on every feature of your countenance, and there is nothing of the kind in that black-and-white *houri* of the painter’s imagination.”

“Why, I thought you admired Hinda !” This was said to conceal the tell-tale blushes and the natural flutter of excitement occasioned by his passionate glances.

“I don’t admire anyone or anything whilst you are in my line of vision ; you are a world of beauty to me,” was his insistent response.

She laughed nervously again and tried to change the subject by asking him the history of this or that picture, and kept him so well occupied in replying to her inquiries that he had not much time to make any more distracting speeches.

When they had sufficiently “done” the gallery they entered a grand drawing-room, which was a blaze of gold and crimson, with magnificent gilded mirrors reaching from the floor to the ceiling, and furniture of costly Louis XIV. pattern. Then another similar apartment, called the Regency Saloon, where were pictures and furniture of George the Fourth’s period, or rather of the period when he was Regent.

Meta did not care much for this room and did not remain long in it ; her pleasure, however, was at its height when Rowland led her to the next adjoining it, which, he explained, had been his mother’s boudoir. It was a fairy-like chamber of blue and silver ; the painted ceiling, the delicate furniture, the graceful Italian statuary with which it was embellished, made it the most elegant and the most luxurious of all that she had seen. She was enthusiastic in her admiration, and spared no pains to express it.

“It is a perfect dream of a place,” she said. “Blue and silver are my favourite combination of colours. What delightful taste your mother must have had !

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And what splendid cabinets !” she exclaimed suddenly, her attention drawn to these costly objects, in which were tastefully arranged the most valuable of the late Viscountess’s possessions.

“You like this room ?” said Rowland. “I am glad. It was my mother’s special sanctum, and neither my father nor I have allowed it to be used generally ; we hold it sacred in memory of her. See, here is her portrait—at least, one of them—painted by Winterhalten soon after her marriage.” And he indicated a large heart-shaped picture over the mantel—the face of a gentle, fair woman with blue eyes and exquisite complexion—a very girlish face set in a frame of golden hair worn neatly over her forehead, as was the fashion of her day.

“And here is another,” said he, “which I fancy you will admire even more. It is the most inestimable to me of all my possessions.”

They now stood before an engaging painting of the young Viscountess Rowland with her baby of three months old in her arms. She is no longer grave, but her happy face is wreathed in smiles as she holds up her beautiful infant for admiration. Rowland was right in thinking that this picture above all the others would claim and chain her senses—and he felt the advantage accruing to himself from the mere fact that she would think all the more of him for being the son of so sweet and fair a woman.

“Now,” he said, after she had duly appreciated its loveliness, “sit here, for you must be quite tired with all this rambling. I want to show you a few things that belonged to my mother in this cabinet.” He gently forced her to a blue velvet divan, placed a cushion for her to lean back against, and then proceeded to unlock the cabinet from a skeleton key in his pocket. Here were amassed the trinkets and hundred and one valuables that rejoice a woman’s heart. Meta noted several pairs of dainty sandals embroidered with precious stones,

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bracelets, earrings, brooches of peculiar Indian workmanship; necklaces weaved from a hundred rows of pearl beads, and with designs on them suggestive of Roman origin; also a great number of gold anklets, nose-rings and head ornaments worn by Indian ladies, and presented to his wife as curiosities by the old Viscount. One by one Rowland exhibited them to Meta; he had played with them when a boy, and they were as familiar to him as the rings on his fingers. But above all these delights she noticed a casket containing what appeared to her tiny swords, arranged neatly in rows on the rich velvet of the case, and each toy weapon sheathed in purest gold, set with emeralds and rubies.

“Oh, what are these?” she cried, her curiosity roused. “I suppose they were your playthings when a child!”

He laughed.

“I should not be here to tell the tale,” said he, “had I been allowed to sport with these.” He removed the casket from its shelf, and sitting beside her on the divan commenced to explain to her astonished ears that these golden-sheathed swordlets were sharper and more dangerous than many a sword. They were Italian stilettoes. They had been the head-ornament of many a dark-eyed Southerner, and his own mother had worn them at fancy balls; when sheathed they were safe enough, but when removed from their golden jackets they needed very careful handling, as their use was unmistakable.

To verify this statement Meta immediately removed one from its resting-place and commenced to unsheathe it. It seemed to have stuck at the hasp, and she found it necessary to put some force on it before she succeeded in separating it. In doing so her left hand rebounded against the point of the dagger, giving it a sharp prick, and making it bleed instantly. She dropped the instrument with a cry of pain, and following the usual custom was about to put it to her lips to draw away any poison

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lurking in the slight wound, but she was intercepted half-way by him.

"Give it me," he said in a frightened whisper. "Let me stanch it in my own way." And before she could prevent him he had raised her hand to his lips, and followed the example of Queen Eleanor to her adored husband.

She endeavoured to laugh off her confusion and blushes. "Why," she said, "one would think it had been you who had been hurt—you look so pale and alarmed."

But his devotion nevertheless impressed her, and he knew he had scored in her affections, for on their eyes meeting there was a soft, tender look in hers which made his heart beat high with hopes of his final success.

"There," he said, after a minute or two, "I think I have stopped the bleeding effectively, and you will come to no harm by this wretched piece of devilry. Shall I banish it into the dust-bin, or break it into a thousand bits for the mischief it has done to my beloved one? I shall always hate the sight of it."

Her white hand was quite well now; it was only a slight cut, and looked none the worse for the mishap, with the exception that there was a rosy spot on it where his lips had been busy.

"No, no," she said in reply, "do not destroy it. Give it me as a souvenir of my carelessness.

"Nay, rather as a souvenir of this happy moment when I have had an opportunity of showing my love for you."

"You are very good," she said softly. "You make me love you in spite of myself." And then to cover her embarrassment she took to admiring the weapon, and counting the emeralds and rubies with which the hilt was beset. "It is very pretty," she repeated. "I wonder how I would look with it stuck in my hair?" With a laugh and a glance at a mirror opposite, she arranged the now sheathed dagger amid the coils of her rich raven

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tresses. He assisted her deftly, and then threw his head back, regarding her critically.

"You look like the beautiful Lucrezia Borgia of world-wide fame," said he at last. "She was fond of wearing ornaments like these."

"I hope I shall never be possessed with the devil, like she was," replied Meta, recklessly. Certainly the ornament suited her, and gave her an air at once foreign and graceful.

"You have never thanked me," he said playfully.

She murmured the two necessary words tamely. Then Rowland could contain his feelings no longer but again pleaded his cause, and won from her the requisite promise that she would be his wife.

Thus, before they returned to The Homestead, an hour later after this, they were plighted lovers, with an understanding between them that the matter should remain a secret for a little while, until Rowland had apprised his father of the engagement.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BALFOUR CODE OF HONOUR

It was not very often that Mr Balfour honoured his wife with a confidential talk. He was as indifferent to her as it was possible for a husband of nine years' standing to be. But one day, about a week after the day spent at Rowland's town house, he astonished his partner for life by entering her heated, perfumed boudoir, and tenderly inquiring as to how she felt; then, without waiting for a reply, he settled himself comfortably near the window.

His wife was as usual on her couch amid her many

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soft cushions ; a lightly-bound novel lay on her lap, but she was not reading—its mere presence excused her from conversation and trouble.

She saw by her husband's face that he had something to tell her, and she waited for him to begin. She seldom started a topic, being one of those rare women who neither care for the first nor the last word.

"Rowland is making a long stay here," said Mr Balfour, after a while spent in admiring the view from the window.

"He seems to enjoy stopping with us," softly murmured Mrs Balfour, wondering why her husband made that remark.

"You have doubtless noticed his persistent attentions to Miss Benson, have you not?"

Mrs Balfour coloured, and roused herself to reply with some spirit.

"I am so glad you have touched on the subject with me, James. It has made me very uncomfortable sometimes to think how unwise we are to allow his courtship to her, knowing as we do his peculiar position. It is not fair to her to be kept in the dark. Many and many a time have Adelaide and I wished to undeceive her, but we are bound by our promise to you not to interfere. He may not get his divorce after all ; in that case it will be very awkward for her."

"It will be very awkward for them both, I think," said Mr Balfour, sarcastically. "And very unpleasant for us too. He has again desired me to promise that we should not hint even such a fact to her. He is quite sure, he says, that should she even have a suspicion of it he would have no more chance with her. His life is bound up in the hope of making her his wife. He thinks the divorce is sure to end in his favour, and as the whole affair will be conducted *in camera*, no one outside his immediate circle of friends will be any the wiser. I am willing," continued Mr Balfour, with a puckered brow, "Rowland should be humoured ; but I cannot

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allow any dishonourable compromise to take place in my house. I am puzzled how to act in the matter. I have no wish to offend Rowland, and yet I do not care that Miss Benson should be injured in any way. I can see that she is very much pleased and flattered by his devotion, and she is, I believe, under the impression that his first wife is dead." He paused and looked annoyed. Possibly his conscience, or whatever there was of it, impelled him to vent his feelings thus; at anyrate he derived some consolation from the fact that he was discussing the point now with an ultimate view to wash his hands of the whole affair should there be any risk by which his honour would be compromised. He feared the talk of the neighbourhood, in which he played an important part; and there were other things also for which he would be blamed should disappointment befall Rowland in his desire.

"Shall we tell Miss Benson to return to the protection of her friends, and then take Winifred for a change?" suggested Mrs Balfour, after a long pause.

"It certainly will be necessary to do so shortly," replied her husband, reflectively, "if this divorce fails; but at present there is no need to think of it. We will let matters go on for a little while longer and see what turns up. When a suitable opportunity is offered and we can advise Miss Benson to take a holiday, we will do so. But my own private opinion is that Rowland will not get his divorce. And then what will become of Miss Benson's dreams of future viscountess-ship? Undoubtedly she will feel it very much, and she will blame us for not having undeceived her as to his real position. I must say she will have reason to do so; we are indeed acting unfairly towards her. When I first encouraged Rowland to flirt with her, I did not mean that he should be serious about it; I wished that he should be amused and enjoy good company during his stay at The Homestead. In short, I really suspected from the first that Miss Benson's affections were drawn

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towards Mr Falkner. I have seen her blush and look pleased when his name was mentioned, and she used to be very often at the Vicarage. Thinking this, I fancied there was no danger of her seriously encouraging Rowland. Was I right?"

"My dear James, it is no use building hopes on Mr Falkner. He is an avowed celibate. I warned Miss Benson so at Rowland's request."

"A celibate!" repeated Mr Balfour, contemptuously. "Fiddlesticks! Never heard of such a monstrosity in the English Church. The man is as much hard hit as a layman. The natural desire to make her his wife was obvious, and I saw it, and so did Rowland and others. Rowland, no doubt, was afraid that his own selfish suit would suffer, so desired you to warn her in time of his avowed celibacy. There is one thing to be said about it, and that is, if she cannot marry a future viscount we can cover inconveniences by putting Falkner in her way. But that is neither here nor there. The strait-laced Vicar, of course, will not care to burden her with his attentions now, after the way she has snubbed and discouraged him. Besides that, she has as good as shown him that she is attached to Rowland."

Mrs Balfour sighed heavily when her husband had finished speaking. It was not often that he troubled her with so much confidence, and this deliberate move on his part of engaging her sympathy in so delicate a matter pleased and flattered her. He had hitherto treated her as a doll and nonentity, and now behold he was seeking advice and thinking her capable of giving it! She cast about in her mind for a sensible rejoinder to his reasonings so as not to disappoint his trust in her, and then began:—

"I am very, very sorry, dear James, that you should have this worry on Miss Benson's account. All this comes from the inconvenience of having a handsome governess in the house. I always thought harm would come of it. Yet I shall miss her music when she is

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gone. And Winifred—you will never get Winifred to consent to her leaving. That child, she will be like an unmanageable colt; there will be no doing anything with her. Dear me, James, what a lot of trouble we shall be in for if Rowland does not get his divorce, and if Miss Benson should have to go; the worry of it all will make me very ill.” And she fairly burst into tears; her weakness of character was not proof against the anticipation of worry and discomfort.

“Pshaw, madam, you are too selfish for anything! You would see the world go to rack and ruin before you neglected your precious health. I have no patience with such silly nonsense.”

He left the room, shutting the boudoir door with such emphasis that Mrs Balfour fairly started with nervous fear from her sofa.

“What a temper he has!” she said tearfully. “It seems to grow worse instead of better. I shall have one of my dreadful physical prostrations after this wretched interview.”

CHAPTER XXII

IN DREAMLAND

ANOTHER week passed since this conversation took place, and nothing of importance happened at The Homestead. Though the Balfours suspected how things were between their guest and Meta, still they did not interfere. It was their wish undoubtedly to ignore the position, and to pretend complete innocence. They made no change in their friendly manner to Meta, and continued to solicit her society for dinner. She rode frequently as usual in the forest, sometimes with one or two of the house party, or sometimes only with Rowland and Winifred.

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Now that the latter was so sure of her, he relaxed a little of his ardour and turned his thoughts to the lawyer's office in Ely Place, where they were still busy compiling evidences of misdemeanour against the Honourable Mrs Rowland. He had impressed upon Meta the necessity of secrecy : it should be for only a short time, he explained ; and as she was herself very shy about openly acknowledging him as her lover, she felt no reluctance in complying with his wish. To her there seemed something very romantic in it all ; besides, the very privacy of the understanding between her and Rowland gave to it an additional passion, which was lacking on her side.

She saw as much of him every day as her duties would allow, and he had abundant opportunities of showing his love for her and pleasing her by his many pretty speeches. In her manner to all around her she was just as natural as ever, and there was not the smallest suspicion that she was in the least puffed up at the idea of being a future viscountess. There was every indication that she would take her greatness quietly ; occasionally her pride and high spirits rebelled at her dependent position and she wished she had a mother to whom she could unburden her full heart, and live in her own home, where Rowland could come and court her ; it was so nice having a lover at her beck and call.

All these aspirations were very natural to one in her position, and you will ask why it was that she did not confide in her aunt and solicit to be received at 4 Tudor Road ? Miss Wilton indeed would have been transported to the seventh heaven of delight had she been aware of her niece's brilliant matrimonial prospects. She would have welcomed her back with open arms and given her of the very best her house afforded. But Meta shrank with a haughty feeling of dislike and contempt when she remembered all the slights and indignities she had suffered in that Notting Hill house. The elderly spinster's lectures were still fresh in her

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mind ; also the many insinuations that were murmured in her hearing about the extra expense she was, etc., etc. With all her natural sweetness of character, Meta, as we have already seen, possessed a high temper and a vindictive propensity never to forget or forgive an injury or slight to her *amour propre*. Hence she almost hated her father at times when she thought of her wrongs in being turned out of his house in order to oblige that odious woman, her stepmother. She never, of course, corresponded with Colonel Benson, and she very seldom now wrote to her aunt, so that they were both ignorant of all that was going on in her life. It was her intention to marry Rowland quietly, and then to startle her relatives with the news of her exceeding good fortune. With what triumph would she drive in her carriage and condescend to pay her aunt a visit ! And how readily would she consent to be reconciled to her father if she thought she could, by so doing, alienate him from his hateful wife !

Yes, I am sorry to say, Meta was vindictively inclined ; she was no angel or saint, but the truest woman that ever existed.

In the meantime she dreamed dreams and lived in a fool's paradise ; she was happy as she could possibly be, and weaved delicious plans of future pleasures and contentment with a husband so fond and devoted as Rowland gave promise to be. Things went on smoothly enough until Rowland one day announced his intention to return to London on matters of business, and this business he privately informed Meta related to his approaching union with her—such arrangements as settlements must be legally attended to before such an important event could be realised. This was all very true in a sense ; if only Meta had the gift of second sight to penetrate the real nature of that business at Ely Place, which was not, as she surmised, a matter of matrimonial settlements, but a necessity to get himself free of one woman before he could lawfully marry another !

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He took a very tender farewell of her, calling her his darling, his sweetest love, the desire of his heart—and so she was. For this man was most truly and most passionately in love with her, and there was nothing in the world he wished so much as to make her his wife. And if this was impossible through the cursedness of Fate and the non-success of his suit—why, she must be his body and soul—of that he was determined. He had set his heart on having her, and have her he would, no matter whether it turned up trumps or not.

CHAPTER XXIII

“I WILL SPARE NOTHING, FRIEND BALFOUR, TO MAKE THE LAW BEND TO MY WILL.”

MR BALFOUR was much relieved when his friend took leave of him. Rowland had paid them a visit of more than six weeks' duration; he had been treated all that time as if he were some august prince, and everybody had laid themselves out to entertain him. It was quite time his visit came to an end.

Mr Balfour jested with him before he left, and chaffed him about leaving his heart behind, which he said “might possibly necessitate a speedy return to the beloved one's vicinity.” Then in a nonchalant way he added, “By the way, old man, how will you manage to propitiate her should this affair not turn out as you wish?” It was a prompter, and Rowland felt that some hidden meaning lay under that feigned indifference. His friend had been almost taciturn in his manner for the last few days; Rowland could not account for it.

“But it will turn out as I wish,” he returned almost vehemently. “It is *bound* to turn up as I expect, and I shall spare nothing to make it do so. Why, my

I will Spare Nothing

dear fellow, it is to hurry up the business that I am going to London for. I desire you again, Balfour, as you are my friend, to keep counsel about this matter, you and your wife and sister. I shall always feel eternally grateful to you for the pleasant time I have had here, and for being the means of my making Miss Benson's acquaintance. I shall never be able to thank you enough for that." And his voice absolutely shook with emotion.

Mr Balfour felt touched. "I am glad you have had a good time," he said blandly. "But I wonder you do not communicate with her father, since you mean so well by her."

"Not for worlds!" burst out Rowland, almost angrily. "Why, she dislikes her father, and he has behaved most shabbily to her. Besides that, I can do nothing openly until the affair is over."

"Ah, that is true; I had forgotten." And Mr Balfour said nothing more *then*, but he reflected deeply. When he returned from seeing Rowland off to the station, he went straight into his library, where he gave himself up to the thinking of every available plan by which he could quietly and yet courteously manage Miss Benson's departure. He knew she had an aunt to whom she could go, but how to bring it all about without compromising his friendship with or breaking his promise to Rowland was still the difficulty to be overcome. He did not wish to imperil the cordial intimacy that had for years existed between them, nor did he feel inclined to create unpleasantness in his own family by doing anything in a hurry—such as desiring Miss Benson to go, for instance. In his heart he felt quite sure that Rowland would never get his divorce, for he was certain that the wife was not guilty, however careless a butterfly of Society she may have been. He had at one time been great friends with her, and still liked her, though he liked Rowland better. It was his dollish wife and sister who could never abide the high-spirited lady.

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The library looked out on the lawn, and flying across the green carpet Mr Balfour saw his little daughter with a letter in her hand making straight for him. The windows were wide open, and he stood near the curtains watching her—a fairy-like apparition in white, with her long, golden hair waving behind her in the wind.

"Papa, papa !" she piped, in her shrill, childish treble, "here is an invitation from Mrs Falkner. I took the letter from Jukes's hand saying I would bring it to you myself. It is addressed to mamma, but you can open it."

And Mr Balfour did open it.

It contained a friendly request for the honour of Mr and Mrs and Miss Balfour's company to a garden-party on the fifteenth of June.

"She must mean me," said Winifred, hotly. "I am Miss Balfour here."

"No, no, my little love," said he, smiling in spite of himself. "Your presence, I think, is solicited in this letter to your mamma, desiring that you and Miss Benson may come too."

"Read it aloud," commanded Winifred, imperiously.

She was obeyed, and the cordial tone of Mrs Falkner's letter greatly helped to mollify her wounded feelings. "I wish I was grown up," she said, nestling close to her father as he sat on the window-seat. "People won't dare then take such liberties with me. But Meta and I will go ; it will be so jolly us all going to the Parsonage. Let me go and tell Meta. What a pity godpapa has just gone ! he would have enjoyed it so much."

Her father detained her, saying,—

"Tell your mother that we shall all go."

"Oh, but, papa, I quite forgot—" interrupted Winifred, suddenly.

"What have you forgotten ?"

"Why," she said quickly, "Meta would not care to go, she has quarrelled with Mr Falkner, you know ; at least they are not so friendly as they used to be, for

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Meta has given up teaching in the Sunday-school. It was Jack who made her give it up."

"That has nothing to do with it, child. If you go, Miss Benson must go. What has the Sunday-school got to do with the garden-party?"

"Oh, I see," returned Winifred, intelligently. "You must not mix the world, the flesh and the devil together, but they must be taken separately. Meta must go whether she likes it or not, because the garden-party is not the Sunday-school, where she used so often to have long chats with Mr Falkner; and though she does not like meeting Mr Falkner now, she must do so for the world's sake. Well, I will explain it all to her, and tell her not to mind having to go now that that wicked Jack is gone."

And she scampered out of the room before her father could reply to her very doubtful speech.

"Whatever does the little rogue mean?" he asked himself. "She seems to understand the state of affairs more than I do. But we shall see what will happen at the clerical garden-party!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS FALKNER'S GARDEN-PARTY

THERE was much to be said in favour of the weather, otherwise old Mrs Falkner could never have exerted herself for so fatiguing a function. The warm, genial summer days had removed every pang from her rheumatic frame, and she was as well and as hearty as her seventy years would allow. A garden-party, she declared to her son, was the easiest and the least expensive of entertainments. Everybody of importance in the parish would be invited, and it was an excellent opportunity for cementing

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parochial cordialities and getting people to understand each other. The Vicarage grounds were large enough to lend themselves to a thing of this sort. There were plenty of pretty walks, arbours and shady arches covered with June roses. The flower-beds were looking their best, and Jukes had done everything that a modern Adam could do in the further embellishment of every nook and corner which he considered stood in need of attention. Small rustic tables were set here and there, and on their snow-white coverings were tastefully spread out baskets of strawberries, peaches and nectarines, all of which were grown on the clerical estate and did credit to the man-of-all-work. Several ladies in the parish, intimate friends of Mrs Falkner, offered their glasses, china and silver for use, and their personal services in assisting to arrange the numerous tables. In short, Mrs Falkner had all her work as hostess done for her, whilst she looked on, supervising, improvising, and directing how things should be fixed generally.

At five in the afternoon the company commenced to arrive, and were received by their hostess under an awning put up for the occasion.

The local band (and it was a very good one) had been engaged by the Vicar to play on the grounds; flags and bunting, and festoons of red, white and blue were waving everywhere, so that it was really quite a grand affair and made a deep impression on the local big-wigs. Amongst the first to arrive were the pompous Colonel Pauncefote, with his wife and son and niece. Then followed in quick succession the Montgommery-Browns, with their family of two sons and daughters; the Cottesleigh-Smiths, and Captain and Mrs Howard-Temple, who were quite new people in the parish, and assumed many airs and graces on the strength of their distant connection with the Norfolk-Howards. Anybody who had friends visiting them were invited to bring their guests, and Captain and Mrs Howard-Temple brought theirs, of whom more shall be said later on. The Homestead

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party were about the last to arrive. In fact, Meta and Winifred had appeared first, the latter driving her in the pony carriage. Winifred was all in white, wearing a large sun-bonnet over her golden hair. She was an exquisite picture of dainty childlike beauty, and was very much admired by the company. Meta looked lovely in a cream muslin dress and large Leghorn hat trimmed with Malmaison carnations. A pink sash was tied into a love knot round her slim waist, and a small bunch of white roses was carelessly arranged on the bodice of her dress.

"My dear," said Mrs Falkner, as she kissed her, "you only want your Paul to make you an ideal Virginia. That simple muslin suits you to perfection."

The Vicar then came forward as he had done to all the others, welcomed her cordially, and took possession of Winifred as a matter of course.

"I am so glad you were able to come," he said, smiling. "Let me find you a shady seat near a table, the contents of which I know will please Miss Winifred's little heart." He laughed and playfully squeezed the child's hand as she skipped at his side.

"You are a dear!" she cried enthusiastically. "It was Meta's fault that I have not been able to come so often as usual. She made excuses each time I asked her, and she told me fairy stories to keep me quiet from asking. I told her I should tell you, and now that I have told you I am quite happy. How glad I am that you asked me to the garden-party, and that I am the only little girl here; you know I like to be the only one of everything. It would have been quite common if there had been other little girls. And I shall enjoy everything ever so much more in consequence of being the only one really young."

"The weather has been too sultry for long walks," said Meta, quietly, as she seated herself beside this small chatter-box and inwardly noted how pale and sad he was looking. "I am afraid it has been trying to you

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too," she added gently. "You don't seem quite so well?"

He quickly discarded all sympathy by changing the subject; the nature in him was too truthful to parry falsehood in social guise. Her conscience smote her as she remembered her shabby treatment of him and the flippancy she had sent in her resignation of the Sunday-school duties she had once undertaken so cheerfully. "He is a saint," she thought, "and I am a most selfish sinner."

She removed an exquisite pair of pink kid gloves (Rowland's gift), with his monogram embroidered on them.

Mr Falkner's quick eyes noticed this possession; the sight of the initials were not lost on him.

If he was pale before, he turned ashen white now.

"My God!" he murmured, horrified. "Has it gone so far as that? She receives presents from him, and is brazen enough to wear them in public." His virtuous horror lay in the fact that he believed her to be acquainted now with Rowland's position as a married man.

Presently he left her with a grave, distant bow, and Colonel Pauncefote sauntered up to speak to them.

"Ah, ah, Miss Benson," said he, cheerfully, "I do not forget that we have met before and that I had the honour of escorting you down at The Homestead dinner the other day." (It was more than a month ago, but the military memory was short.) "How are you? how are you? But I needn't ask—a rose amid many roses and 'sweet as English air can make her.' And you, my pretty Winifred, where is your dear mamma? My word! the time will soon come when she will have to exert herself to chaperon the greatest beauty of the day."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Winifred, taking a dainty bite at a peach. "I sha'n't be a beauty at all; but I shall be a great heiress, which is much more interesting to you men than mere good looks." This reply so

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astonished the Colonel that he stared at the terrible child for a whole minute, until Meta, laughing gaily, restored him to his self-possession by saying,—

“Don’t heed her, Colonel Pauncefote. She says the most dreadful things, but she doesn’t mean to be naughty. Do you, Winifred?”

“I don’t know,” replied Winifred, still busy at her peach. “I haven’t given the matter any consideration. In a garden-party of this description one doesn’t wish to be troubled with side issues.”

The Colonel burst out laughing, and Meta joined in it; but the little lady retained her gravity, possibly thinking they were great donkeys to laugh at nothing.

Mr and Miss Pauncefote, who had been strolling about the garden like a pair of love-birds, seeing them so merry, came and joined them, and added not a little to the fun, which Meta thoroughly enjoyed. Whilst she thus relished the pleasure of the passing scene before her, another scene of a different sort was being enacted near the awning, where Mrs Falkner still stood receiving her oncoming guests. There was a group of young and old matrons, of which Mrs Balfour formed one. That lady had arrived with her sister-in-law and husband, and they were seated at a dainty little table sipping iced coffee and toying with some delicious nectarines.

“Such a glorious day!” Mrs Balfour was saying, as though her hostess had also arranged the weather. And how charmed she was with everything. The garden looked lovely. What a picture Mrs Falkner was in her lavender silk and old-fashioned baby bonnet. Dear me! how pale and grave the Vicar looked. “A regular *memento mori*,” she whispered to Miss Balfour. “I do hope he will not want to discuss the parish with us!”

Mr Falkner was at that moment coming up to them. A fair, florid, large woman, attired in red silk with bonnet and parasol to match, accompanied him. She looked very warm and very uncomfortable, when her

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host, bowing courteously, and summoning a smile as he did so, introduced Mrs Bankses — Mrs Balfour ; Miss Balfour—Mrs Bankses.

There was a general inclination of heads and the proud lady of The Homestead tried to look pleased, though inwardly she was thinking the newcomer the most vulgar-looking person she had ever set eyes on. Mrs Howard-Temple, who had brought Mrs Bankses, started some trifling topic about the perfect weather and her fond hopes that it would last all the summer. Her friend, however, begged to differ. "I detest the heat so," she said, fanning herself vigorously. "It is absolutely killing to my delicate constitution. I should like it to be winter all the year round. You are no doubt more warmly situated here at Epping than we are at Congleton, which is a cool place to live in, even in the hottest summer. The Manor House is situated in a sheltered spot, and it is decidedly salubrious, for my five children enjoy the very best health."

Whilst she was speaking Mrs Balfour was regarding her attentively and wondering where she had heard the name. Bankses seemed familiar, so did the Manor House, Congleton. Surely she had come across the lady somewhere in the past !

Before, however, she could solve the problem, Adelaide Balfour forestalled her by saying,—

"Oh, is the Manor House, Congleton, your home ? How very strange ! You must be the lady then who recommended Miss Benson to us ? "

Mrs Bankses opened her eyes very wide, and her face crimsoned unbecomingly. "Miss Benson !" she repeated. "What Miss Benson ? I do not remember recommending anyone of that name to you ! "

"Miss Benson, the governess," returned Adelaide, quickly. "We received a letter from Major and Mrs Bankses of the Manor House, Congleton, Cheshire, recommending Miss Benson most highly."

"Yes, indeed !" put in Mrs Balfour, with flushed

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cheeks, "and very pleased we are with Miss Benson. She is a most accomplished and most amiable girl."

"Madam," said Mrs Bankes, astonished and non-plussed beyond description by this news, "I know nothing of the Miss Benson you speak of; and certainly neither I nor my husband ever replied to a letter from you about her. I once had in my employ a governess of that name, and her conduct was such I was obliged, for the sake of my young daughters, to dismiss her without notice. I must ask you to excuse me if I appear contradictory."

"There must be some mistake," murmured Mrs Balfour, helplessly looking around for her husband.

He was standing near the group with the Vicar by him; both gentlemen had been attentive listeners to the conversation.

"There must certainly be some mistake," echoed the Vicar, his cheeks an unwonted red and his eyes glittering with suppressed wrath. "Miss Benson is a lady of rare talent and undeniable virtue. My mother and I have always considered Miss Winifred Balfour very fortunate to possess so charming and able an instructress." Alas! to what extent do our passions rule us! A few minutes ago he had lost his good opinion of her (or fancied he had), and now behold he was lauding her as the most virtuous of her sex merely because his undying love for her could not endure the miserable sight of seeing her probable disgrace. He had no sooner uttered the last words in her defence when, with a courteous bow, he left them.

Mrs Howard-Temple, to cover the evident ill-breeding of her friend, endeavoured to clear the atmosphere by pleasantly remarking that mistakes were so easily made through similarity of names and localities, and then adroitly engaged Miss Balfour in an animated discussion concerning fancy work—a subject in which Adelaide was proficient.

The little merry group round the tea-table had now

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broken up. Winifred had satisfied her appetite to the very utmost, and had proposed that she and Meta should go to the adjoining field and feed "Puck," the little Alderney calf, with fresh grass. Meta immediately consented, and Colonel Pauncefote offered his escort.

"I don't think," said Winifred, to whom he had taken a marvellous fancy, "that we are in need of the military to defend us. But you may come, on condition that you pay *me* all the attention. I notice that nearly all the gentlemen who have bestowed their favours on me only do so because I have such a pretty governess with me. That is not the kind of favour I care to burden myself with. It must be me and me only." And with the air of a coquette Missie slid her hand into that of the Colonel and dragged him away with her.

Meta followed at a little distance behind them. She was in that complacent condition of mind when a smile remains chronic on the lips. She fancied she had reason to be pleased with her life and all the brilliant, ennobling prospects looming before her. At present she walked slowly after her pupil, yet courting the pleasure of being alone so that she could think of Rowland and enjoy one of her sweet daydreams.

The path taken by Winifred was through a small wicket gate hidden away under a vista of trees and forming a sort of arch overhead. Meta watched her across the meadow and then resolved that she should stop at the little enclosure until they returned.

Mr Falkner's Declaration

CHAPTER XXV

MR FALKNER'S DECLARATION

THE band was playing "Annie Laurie," and Meta hummed it to herself as she listened. She repeated the last two lines of the stanza aloud :—

" 'Twas there that Annie Laurie
Gave me her promise true."

And she broke it ! How very foolish of her to give a promise and then break it ! She couldn't have known her own mind, that's certain."

A sudden rustle of the branches startled her, and turning round quickly she stood face to face with Mr Falkner.

Her dark eyes dilated with a sort of nervous fear that something unpleasant was going to happen. He looked terribly in earnest.

"What is it ?" she asked. "Does Mrs Balfour want me ?"

He was quite close to her, his clothes almost touching hers, and being a head or two taller, he was bending over her in a protective manner that made her feel all at once shy and stupid. Her eyes drooped beneath his grave scrutiny. "No one can look like that," she thought, "unless they mean something."

"I came of my own accord," replied Mr Falkner, hoarsely.

She brightened up. "That is good of you ! I suppose you thought I was being neglected ? I have been having quite a good time so far." She smiled

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graciously into his face to assure him of her perfect contentment, but looked grave almost instantly afterwards at the meaning she read there.

The Vicar stood regarding her for one whole minute, silent, thoughtful, and bewilderingly puzzled in what way to commence the interview. It had been his firm intention to have some sort of understanding with her, to solicit to pay his addresses—in short, to have her acknowledge him as a suitor. That garden-party so carefully planned was to be the scene of his happiness or misery (he barely considered the latter as possible); but already he had been repulsed with two tremendous shocks. Her open use of Rowland's gifts—what could be the meaning of that? Secondly, this exposure of her deceit and its doubtful bearing on her character. But he was eager to save her the embarrassment of meeting Mrs Bankes, and every moment was precious. With a powerful effort he put aside his own private feelings, and rather awkwardly began, as a preliminary,—

“Have you ever lived at the Manor House, Congleton?”

The girl stared at him in blank amazement, wondering if his senses had suddenly taken French leave.

“Yes. Why do you ask?” she replied inaudibly.

“There is a lady here of the name—”

“I was once governess to Mrs Bankes of the Manor House,” interrupted Meta, boldly. “Has she been commenting on all my faults and telling lies about me? She is odious enough for anything!”

“That is not the question,” returned Mr Falkner, quickly. “I introduced her to Mrs Balfour, who immediately remembered the name and politely thanked her for recommending you. Mrs Bankes emphatically denied having ever done so, and said neither she nor her husband could possibly bring themselves to do you such a favour, as they had been obliged to dismiss you without notice. I am truly sorry for your sake that this unpleasantness should occur here; it will make your

Mr Falkner's Declaration

position with the Balfours very difficult. May I ask how it was that wrote on your behalf?"

A maddening feeling of humiliation possessed Meta. He had spoken all along in a measured, dictatorial tone, as though he had a right to question her—ay, even suspect her of foul play, and all her pride rose up at the evident insult.

"Perhaps you suspect me of forging it?" She jerked out the words angrily. "But why I should be taken to task in this shameful manner is beyond my comprehension."

Robert Falkner's eyes flashed; he verily indeed thought then that she was guilty. She had parried his question, and had boldly evaded the subject for no other reason than that she was unable to give a satisfactory reply to his query. This was his instant reflection; and the idea shot through his brain and burned there like fire. How could he ever have loved one so worthless, so utterly depraved? He remembered Rowland and her open encouragement of the attentions of a married man, and his blood boiled to think he could ever have honoured her with his pure love. His answer, however, was mildly spoken.

"You do wrong to flout me thus. Believe me when I tell you that I only have your interests at heart. I wished to spare you the awkwardness of meeting this lady from Cheshire, and that is the reason why I have asked you these questions." Then with more heat, "I suppose you realise what it all means? Mrs Balfour will insist on knowing the ins and outs of this affair. She will want to know who it was that wrote that letter of recommendation in Mrs Bankes's name."

"And she will know, and so will you, Mr Falkner, before I am many minutes older," interpolated the outspoken girl, impulsively. "You shall not remain under the impression that I am a forger of letters." A pained look passed over his face, and Meta seeing it regretted her sharp words and continued her say in a softer tone.

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"Of course it is very unpleasant this introduction of Mrs Banks into our midst. She is the very last person I ever care to see again as long as I live. She dismissed me for no reason but her stupid jealousy, and refused to give me a testimonial, although she could have no complaint whatever either against my teaching or my accomplishments. I asked Major Banks to write for me as I was sure Mrs Balfour would not have engaged me without a reference from my last situation. And he did ; but his wife, however, knew nothing about it. It was arranged between us that she should not know."

"But," said Mr Falkner, raising his eyebrows, and gazing at her bewildered, "you must have been very intimate with Major Banks for him to consent to such an arrangement ?"

"Major Banks was very friendly and nothing more. He happened to be travelling in the same carriage with me that day I came to Epping to see Mrs Balfour. I told him of the difficulty I experienced in securing an appointment as governess without a reference from my last engagement. I asked him if he would write in his wife's name ; he most willingly consented, and we planned it all between us. I saw no dishonour in it, neither did he." She challenged him with a questioning look, and tapped her hand impatiently on the little gate.

"The dishonour lay in the fact that you were deceiving his wife and putting yourself in a very compromising position with a married man."

"I fail to see the compromise. But then I am not a strait-laced parson." This was decidedly rude, and she knew it, and felt sorry for having made the remark.

He kindly ignored her brusqueness. "You are not protected or shielded as you ought to be," said he, gently. "I do not blame you so much as I blame Major Banks, who no doubt meant well but acted unwisely. I am glad, however, you have confided in me.

Mr Falkner's Declaration

I should not like to lose my good opinion of you for the world ! ”

“ You are very kind,” was her somewhat sarcastic reply. “ And now that I have honoured you with my confidence, pray, what do you propose to do for me in return ? ” It was not a pretty way of asking him to help her in her present dilemma, but it must be confessed that she was nervous and irritable, and she had reason for being out of temper.

“ I will do anything I can to shield you from any possible embarrassment arising in consequence of your imprudence—I mean of Mrs Bankes's presence here—that is if you will let me be of service to you.” He hesitated ; her attitude was not reassuring. He had so much to say to her, and so little time to say it in.

She looked pensive if not sad. She felt that she had done wrong in deceiving the Balfours, and that they would be justified in dismissing her from their household. If such a thing should happen, what should she do ? Oh ! the wretchedness of seeking another situation ! But no ! there was Rowland ; *he* would be always ready to help her.

“ You will remember,” said Mr Falkner, anxiously, “ that my mother is your friend. Please come to her for advice in any difficulty in which you may find yourself.”

His kindness humiliated her ; he seemed to have read her thoughts. If only she could avail herself of Mrs Falkner's protection, how happy she would have been ! She could then defy the Balfours, and yet maintain her independence. But there was Rowland to consider ; he would resent her accepting hospitality from that quarter. Neither could she accept it without enlightening them in regard to her secret engagement. Besides, it was courting danger to be in the same house with Robert Falkner.

“ I must go away from here,” she murmured, meeting his earnest eyes with a dreamy, far-away look born of her secret anxiety.

A Woman at Bay

"Why must you go?" he asked. "Why not make my mother your friend? She is so fond of you, and has over and over again said that she would love to have someone like you with her."

Meta shook her head; her face was quite pale now and wore the same haggard look as when four or five months ago she sat pondering over her unsettled life. The same wild feeling of unrest possessed her, a feeling tenfold increased under the present circumstances, for she had so much more advantage to lose on leaving the Balfours, and so much more discomfort to suffer by it.

"I must go away from here," she repeated somewhat bitterly. "Under no circumstances should I wish to meet Mrs Bankes, nor do I wish to mix again in the company. She would only openly insult me, and I must endeavour to spare your mother and yourself any further unpleasantness. Please take me away from here." She looked up entreatingly into his face.

The look maddened him; all the self-control he had put upon himself vanished; he forgot everything except that he loved her. "I am partly to blame for what has taken place," he began passionately. "It was I who introduced this odious woman to Mrs Balfour. Oh, Miss Benson, if I had only known, if I could only have foreseen this, it would never have happened!" Then, with all the eloquence he was master of, he told her of his love and the desire he had of making her his wife.

"But," said Meta, pale and trembling in her astonishment, "Mrs Balfour informed me that you were an avowed celibate. How can you think, then, of marrying me or any other woman?"

An expression of intense pain contracted his features. "I know," he replied meekly, "that I once made such a stipulation with myself. But the promise does not exist now."

"And why?" she asked.

"Because I love you," he replied, "and cannot live without you."

Mr Falkner's Declaration

"You don't think it is wrong to set it aside even for the sake of your love? I thought a promise of that sort is always binding on a clergyman."

"Why should it be more than on any other man? I have consulted my Bishop, and he most emphatically advises me to ignore such a condition."

"What induced you to make it at all and to speak of it in the parish as if it was something to be proud of?" she demanded curiously.

"There was a time," began Falkner, solemnly, "when I thought I could do my work better as a celibate; but I no longer think so. I feel sure you would help me a great deal as my wife."

"There was a time also," she rejoined, blushing and speaking with some passion, "when I loved you, and would have gone on loving you, until I heard of your vow. It is too late now, I have pledged myself to another."

"Child, what can you mean by saying you have already pledged yourself to another?" he cried angrily. "Do you imply that you have promised to marry a disreputable man like—"

"Be quiet," she burst out furiously. "You know nothing about him, else you would never speak disrespectfully of one whom I have reason to believe is the very soul of generosity. Of course you are jealous of him; all men in love are of their successful rivals."

"But I tell you," he returned, with equal choler, "you cannot possibly dream of marrying one in his position, though I see you have no scruples in wearing his gifts in public, as though you already belonged to him." The accent of scorn in his voice enraged her; he observed it, and strove to appease it by adding, more softly and persuasively, "Do not think me unkind, but I have sworn to serve you, and I should be neglecting my duty if I failed to explain to you the very obvious reasons why it would be

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positively wrong and sinful for any Christian woman to marry a man in Rowland's present position."

"I will not stop here to listen to any disparaging disclosures you may think right to make," she interrupted with dignity. "The best way for you to serve me at present is to get me out of this; I must on no account meet that wretched Bankes woman, and I want to go home and think what I had best do about telling Mrs Balfour the whole story. It is a veritable storm in a tea-cup; but it is a storm that will undoubtedly render me homeless. Hush, I hear voices," she added in a whisper. "Come, Mr Falkner, I must leave this immediately."

A narrow pathway under the trees led to the stables, and from thence to a larger field opening out directly on the high road to The Homestead. Meta knew this path well, it being a decided short cut home, so it was with rapid steps she tripped along, ducking her head down occasionally to avoid collision with the thick overtopping branches. Mr Falkner followed her, his tall form very much bent for the same cause.

"Good-bye," she said on reaching the gate. "So many thanks for warning me in time. Please make my apologies to your mother and the Balfours. Say I am ill—say anything you like. They will guess the real reason no doubt. Again, good-bye, Mr Falkner."

She darted across the field, leaving him at the fence watching her, and feeling as if his life and all the joys and hopes that go to make up life had gone with her.

He had sacrificed his most sacred resolutions for love of her, and she had refused him, preferring another man's love to his, and that man unworthy of the name he bore, one whom no self-respecting woman should consent to marry. Had Rowland, he asked himself, already obtained his divorce, that he had succeeded in engaging her affections?

Meta is advised to take a Holiday

CHAPTER XXVI

IN WHICH META IS ADVISED TO TAKE A HOLIDAY

SUDDEN recollections of his duty as host prevented him from further meditation on the subject: with all the strength of will he was capable of he shook off the feeling of desolation by which he was possessed, and retraced his steps to the wicket gate.

Winifred and Colonel Pauncefote were returning leisurely along from contemplation of the Alderney, and Mr Falkner, espying them, resolved to go halfway and meet them. He could see that the former was chattering away nineteen to the dozen, and that the Colonel wore a puzzled look, like that of a man who is hearing some strange home-truths which no doubt will set him a-thinking for many a day to come. The Vicar smiled sadly to himself as he took in the situation, and resolved to tell Winifred first of her governess's departure. "She will bother me with questions," he thought, "but it will be easier to answer questions when we are alone than when we have a lot of people around us."

He need not have feared a difficulty in broaching the subject so painful to him, for as soon as he was within speaking distance he was asked what he had done with Miss Benson. "We saw you talking together at the wicket," said she, "and I told Colonel Pauncefote that I believed you were scolding her. At anyrate you would not flirt with her, like Mr Rowland does, for instance. But I mustn't tell tales or Meta will be angry, and I shall get a lecture from my god-papa when he comes back."

The Vicar told her, in as few words as possible, that

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Meta had gone home ; she was tired and a little unwell, and had asked him to make all excuses to Winifred.

"You must let me take care of you in the meantime," he added in a friendly, conciliating manner.

"Dear me !" articulated Winifred, "how very strange that she should feel unwell all of a sudden ! I will go and tell mamma and auntie." And off she scampered, greatly to the relief of her host, who was thus saved the necessity of having to fib or prevaricate in Meta's behalf.

Mrs Balfour received the news very coolly, remarking that if Miss Benson had felt ill it was the best thing she could do to go home without any fuss or bother ; then she changed the subject by fondly asking her little daughter how she was enjoying herself.

"Yes," replied the child, somewhat doubtfully, "Colonel Pauncefote and I have been in the fields together. I found him a very sensible and intelligent man to talk to."

This remark, delivered with the utmost gravity, electrified the company, and there was a merry laugh all round, the Colonel joining in it more heartily than any other.

"I have got some of her sayings down in my notebook," said he, good-humouredly, producing that record from his pocket. "Here is one of them, Falkner, for your special edification. I asked her what she thought of High Beech Church, and if she liked attending it on a Sunday ? Her reply was that she thought the services there very good, the choir-boys well behaved, and Mr Falkner himself an excellent preacher ; but his teaching, she believed, was not orthodox—at least, so people said ; but then people didn't always speak the truth, so that she must be quite grown up before she could really offer an opinion on the subject."

"She is a wise child," observed Mr Falkner, gravely. He smiled his sweet winning smile on Winifred, who immediately came up to him, and putting her hand

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caressingly into his, said, in a tone meant to be affectionate,—

“Don’t be offended, dear Mr Falkner, but I like you all the better for not being a Jesuit in disguise.”

An hour afterwards the Balfours were on their way home. Adelaide drove back in Winifred’s pony carriage, so that the happy pair were alone.

“And what do you think of Mrs Bankes?” asked Mr Balfour, sarcastically. The usages of good society had necessitated absolute self-control, but his astonishment, vexation and displeasure were none the less felt. His pride was deeply injured, and he was fully determined to inquire into the matter thoroughly, no matter at what cost, either to the risk of offending Rowland through the explanation he would demand of Meta, or the unpleasantness of her necessary departure. He believed he had at last found an excuse by which he could politely advise her to make different arrangements for a time. There was some consolation in the thought that if he had acted dishonourably in conniving to deceive her about Rowland, she had done herself more injury by her wilful and almost criminal deception regarding Mrs Bankes’s supposed letter of recommendation.

“I wish,” said Mrs Balfour, wearily, “Mr Falkner would not introduce undesirable people to us. It is quite uncalled for.”

“It remains to be seen whether she is undesirable or not. Nevertheless she has done us an invaluable service, for which I have no doubt we shall have reason before long to thank her.”

On their arrival home the butler met them in the hall and handed them a note. It was from Miss Benson, he explained, and he had been requested to give it to them immediately they returned. The letter was addressed to his wife, but Mr Balfour took possession of it as they both entered the library to read it at their leisure.

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She threw herself on a couch and anxiously studied his face whilst he mastered the contents. Her eyes were dimmed with tears—a foretaste of coming trouble. She had become fond of Meta and felt sincerely sorry at the mere idea of losing her thus. Her easy, indolent nature longed for a smooth, uneventful existence, clouded by no worry or unnecessary change; and it seemed it was not to be.

When her husband handed her the note in silence, her wet eyes could scarcely make out the following :—

“DEAR MRS BALFOUR ”(wrote Meta),—“ Mr Falkner kindly informed me of your meeting with my former employer, Mrs Bankes, and I thought it would be more prudent to leave early rather than undergo the trial of encountering her. I am told that she flatly denied having ever replied to your letter on my behalf. She is quite right; it was her husband, Major Bankes, who, at my request, recommended me to you. His wife knew nothing of the transaction.

“I hope you will forgive me for deceiving you, but were you in my position you would understand the difficulty I was in then. I am quite willing to go away if you would rather I did not remain after what has happened.—Believe me, yours very sincerely,

“META BENSON.”

“I am really very sorry for the poor girl,” said Mrs Balfour, as she folded the note and nervously regarded the upright figure at the mantelpiece. “You see she acknowledges her fault frankly.”

“I see nothing except that the whole thing looks very fishy,” returned her husband, irritably. “You evidently fail to notice the compromising position between her and this Major Bankes. No wonder his wife was jealous. There must have existed a very warm friendship, an intimacy—intimacy which must have been mutually cordial, I think, to induce that

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gentleman to act as he has done. Compromising—very compromising,” he repeated, smiling a peculiar smile, which, if Meta had seen, would have driven her out of her mind with rage. He pressed the electric bell as he spoke, and on the butler appearing he desired that a message should be sent up to Miss Benson that Mrs Balfour wished to speak to her.

Almost immediately afterwards Meta entered. She still had on her white frock with the pretty pink sash and roses on her dress; her dark hair was a little ruffled, and her eyes looked heavy, as though she had been weeping, but a graceful picture she was as she stood there before them; and in response to a smiling invitation from Mrs Balfour she seated herself composedly and waited to hear what they had to say.

The sight of her pretty face and her dignified self-possession somewhat weakened Mr Balfour's resolutions. He was not averse to beauty in any shape or form, and here was a beautiful woman in distress. All his superficial courtliness of manner returned to him, and standing with his back to the mantelpiece he signed to his wife to begin the interview.

“My dear,” began Mrs Balfour, feebly, “we were discussing our meeting with that disagreeable Mrs Bankes this afternoon. How very unwise of Mrs Falkner to have invited her! Such a mistake!”

“She did not know, dear Mrs Balfour. How could she?” returned Meta, quickly. Then, anxious to come to the point at once, she added: “I thought it better to write my explanation, so that you would be quite free to act as you think best. I really intended sooner or later to acquaint you with the real truth. I am glad your accidental meeting with her has revealed it all to you.”

“She is not at all a nice woman,” said Mrs Balfour, sympathetically, “and I was sorry to think that you ever had to live with her. But that is not what we want to speak to you about.” And she looked helplessly at her husband for further information and help.

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"It is your indisposition, my dear Miss Benson, with which my wife and I are so concerned," put in Mr Balfour, unctuously. "Mr Falkner told us that you felt ill and were obliged to leave early on that account. Ah! for some days past we have all remarked on the paleness of your cheeks and the general languor in your movements. You evidently stand in need of a thorough change; and we must be unselfish enough to advise you to take it without considering ourselves in the matter. Winifred, we know, is a most exacting pupil, and you have all these months devoted yourself to her unreservedly; the strain is too much for you. I think, were you now to take a complete rest, you would return to us not only refreshed, but considerably fortified and improved in your health."

"There is nothing the matter with my health," said Meta, abruptly.

"Ah! my dear Miss Benson, pardon me, but your pallor tells a tale of its own. Let us both induce you to go away for a month or two to your friends; and when you return to us we will show you the difference in your charming appearance." He smiled and bowed blandly in his most theatrical manner.

Meta understood the covert meaning; she had expected something of the sort, so, with cool readiness, she promptly replied, "Yes, I will go away if you like."

"You are not looking at all well or strong, dear Miss Benson," put in Mrs Balfour, feeling that it was necessary for her under the circumstances to support her husband in this subterfuge. "Take a few weeks' holiday and then come back to us and Winifred. Ah, that reminds me, it is better to arrange your departure as quietly as possible. Don't let the dear child know that you are going, or we shall have trouble with her. She is so fond of you, and would make a dreadful fuss were she to hear that you were leaving even for a holiday."

"I understand," replied Meta, mechanically.

She felt a storm of inward regret mingled with just

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rage at this summary dismissal. That it was intended to be a final one she felt not the smallest doubt. They were right to be angry with her about the letter. She had done wrong in wilfully deceiving them. Ah, well ! now it was all over. They would never again feel the same to her, and the sooner she carried herself off the better.

With a heavy sigh expressive of the sorrow she felt she rose from her seat and quietly left the room.

Mrs Balfour burst into tears. "Oh !" she cried, "I wish we had never met that horrid woman to-day !"

"It is necessary," said her husband, taking no notice of either the tears or the remark, "that we should compensate Miss Benson to the very utmost. I desire that you will make her a handsome present before she leaves, and give her to understand that we mean her no slight or unkindness ; that we are concerned about her welfare as much as ever, and she must on no condition think we intend her to leave for good. It will be time enough to tell her that when we hear the final result of Rowland's divorce suit. Should he win, we will receive her again—not as governess, but as our guest, and she shall be married out of our house ; if he loses, of course the matter lies in a nutshell." And with a shrug of the shoulders, truly becoming in so great a diplomatist, Mr Balfour intimated to his wife that the business was at an end and that he had nothing more to say on the subject.

CHAPTER XXVII

"Oh, it was pitiful,
Near a whole city full,
Home she had none !"

WHEN she returned to her own room and felt that she could indulge in her grief unseen, she burst into a

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passion of tears, and it was while she was thus weeping Winifred entered with the express intention of inquiring after her health.

The child ran up to her, and hugging her demonstratively, said, "Don't cry, don't cry, dear, dear Meta. I am sorry you are feeling ill, and I was selfish all the time and wanted to enjoy myself. But Mr Falkner looked so sad, and no wonder, because of course he knew how ill you were!"

Meta, remembering Mrs Balfour's injunction, allowed her pupil to be deceived with the idea that it was indisposition alone that made her cry, although she longed to tell Winifred everything, for she knew well she would receive every sympathy in return for her confidence. She took the child on her knee, and caressing the long golden curls, said, affectionately, "I have a very bad headache, darling, and you must excuse my not coming to dine with you this evening."

"Of course," said Winifred, "you shall have your dinner sent up to you; and I shall bring you some grapes, for they are splendid things to drive away tears and headache."

"Thank you, dearie, that would be sweet of you," said Meta, fondly. Adding, "You care for me just a little, don't you, Winifred?"

"Rather," was the reply, given without hesitation. "I was just telling Colonel Pauncefote this afternoon what an invaluable treasure and comfort you are to me, and he quite believed it."

Meta smiled through her tears. "Darling, try always and think well of me, even if other people shouldn't agree with you. I should like so to feel that I could depend upon your love for me. We have been good friends, have we not, dearie? You have been such a sweet little pupil!"

"I haven't always been good or obedient, you know," returned Winifred, pressing her pink cheeks against Meta's pale ones and owning up to the fact somewhat

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reluctantly. "That isn't to be expected of me. But on the whole we agree very well."

Meta wound her arms round the soft little changeling and embraced her passionately. Her sad heart yearned for love, and this child gave it ungrudgingly, unquestioningly.

"I am afraid," she said gravely, "I have not been so strict over your lessons as I ought to have been, but—"

"The idea!" interrupted Winifred, with so injured an air that Meta smiled again in spite of herself. "Why, if you had been an atom more strict we should never have got on together! Fancy your being a disciplinarian" (she stumbled over the long word, but pronounced it finally correctly and triumphantly). "It is only an ugly governess who could be that. You are much too pretty to be nagging and finding fault all day. In short, I was only thinking this morning that it would be easier for me if you were even less strict than you are, and let me off my spelling and geography more often than you do."

Just then Winifred's nurse, the elderly matron who was somewhat jealous of Meta and the strong hold she had on the child's affections, entered and took the child away to dress for dinner, and Meta let her go after imprinting another passionate kiss on the sweet little face.

She knew it would be the last kiss she would ever give her, for her mind was fully made up now to leave The Homestead early on the morrow.

What use would it be to remain a day longer than she could possibly help? She had been politely asked to go, and she felt that her best plan would be to take her departure before Winifred was astir, and to have her luggage sent later on.

For Meta to think was to do. She acted as usual impulsively, urged on by her pride and the rankling wound her self-esteem had received that day. Immediately, as Winifred left her, she commenced her packing, moving about in the process like one in a

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miserable dream. Some hazy idea of throwing herself on Rowland's protection possessed her. If he, her lover (and, as she believed), her future husband were not the right person to go to in her distress, who was? Her father's house was forbidden ground to her; she hated the thought of returning to 4 Tudor Road, therefore she had no other resource, she reflected, than seeking Rowland to care for her.

Her wardrobe had greatly increased since her stay at The Homestead: indeed, she was indebted to Mrs Balfour for many a charming new dress and ornament. Among her treasures she came across the jewelled stiletto Rowland had given her. The sight of it reminded her of the afternoon they had spent together in his house and the tender expression he had given of his love for her. There were also little perfumed notes she had received from him. She read these over again, and satisfied her mind that she was doing wisely in seeking his protection. No one would advise her better than he would. It was not the regular thing, of course, for a young woman to do, but circumstances alter cases—and her case certainly was very peculiar.

Mrs Balfour ordered her up a sumptuous dinner, which she barely touched; she was too excited, too unrestful to eat. Winifred sent her nurse with a bunch of grapes and a royal message that she was too tired and sleepy to come and see her dear Meta again, but that she hoped she would eat every one of the grapes and enjoy a good night's rest into the bargain.

By ten o'clock Meta had done all her packing, and had even put fresh labels to her boxes; and now, wearied and depressed with the sudden change that had come into her life, she sat by the open window of her room for a quiet think.

A gentle rap on the door interrupted her reverie, and to her "Come in" Mrs Balfour stood before her. She looked around the somewhat dismantled room, noticed the already labelled trunks with an air of astonishment.

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Then her glance fell on Meta in her print wrapper, her hair all loose over her shoulders, and she advanced into the room with a timid air.

"My dear," she said feebly, "why are you in such a hurry to pack? Surely a week or two would be time enough."

Meta shook her head, and to ward off chance observations from her own tearful face she pushed forward a comfortable easy-chair for her visitor's delectation, also a hassock for her feet.

Mrs Balfour settled herself comfortably. She was in evening dress and looked unwontedly flushed with all the extra exertions she had undergone that day. "I went to see how Winifred was sleeping," she observed as an excuse for her unusual visit. "And then my anxiety about your headache brought me here. Is it better?"

"Yes, thank you," replied Meta, gratefully. "I am glad you have come; if I had not seen you to-night I should have left a note telling you that I have made all my preparations to go away early to-morrow morning."

"That is very soon," exclaimed Mrs Balfour, astonished. "Have you communicated with your aunt or your father?"

"No; nor do I intend to do so. I mean to take lodgings in London. I know a lady who keeps a sort of private select hotel in the Strand, and I shall stay with her until I know what my final plans are."

Mrs Balfour scrutinised her features and gasped a long breath before she replied. "It is not the rule for young ladies to live alone in an hotel; but as you say you know this lady, of course it does not sound so bad. I should advise you, however, to be careful about receiving masculine visitors whilst you are there, or you may get yourself talked about." She thought of Rowland and her face flushed painfully. The temptation was strong in her to warn the unprotected, homeless girl against encouraging his attentions, but the fear of her husband's displeasure deterred her.

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Meta coloured at the advice given her, and was on the point of taking Mrs Balfour into her confidence when she recollected her promise of secrecy to Rowland, and she refrained.

"I shall be glad," she said, after a while, "to have my luggage sent after me to Liverpool Street Station, where I shall meet it by a certain train and convey it to this hotel. I do not wish anyone to know of my being there, for I am not sure whether I shall stop longer than a day or two. I shall see my aunt in the meantime, and possibly arrange to stay with her until I am again suited." She turned her face away to hide an amused smile at the expression, then continued, "So if you should be asked my whereabouts by anyone, please say that I have gone to Miss Wilton, at 4 Tudor Road, Notting Hill."

"Yes," returned Mrs Balfour, quickly, "go straight to your aunt, my dear; and let me give you a word of advice—tell her all about yourself, confide in her unreservedly as you would to your mother. Believe me, it is much the best course." She stopped, her conscience greatly relieved. She hoped Miss Wilton would unearth all Rowland's secrets, and thus protect the girl in time from further duplicity in that quarter.

"I don't wish you to go," she said, "without telling you again how sorry we shall all be to lose you, even for a time. I want you to enjoy yourself thoroughly whilst you are away, and to derive every benefit from your holiday. See, my dear, one of the reasons of my coming here to-night was to give you this present; it will be useful to you. One can never have too much money when one is moving about." And coming up to Meta she stooped and kissed her, thrusting into her hand at the same time a handsome purse, bulky with the generous contents it held.

Meta returned the kiss. "You are very kind," she said gratefully. "I shall always think lovingly of you and Winifred."

At the mention of her child's name all Mrs Balfour's

Oh, It was Pitiful

maternal fears rose. "Yes," she said quickly, "it is best that you should go quietly away to-morrow morning. I could not bear to see the dear child in tears, and I know how it will be should she get wind of your departure. There will be trouble no doubt when you are once gone, but we must try our best to comfort her. Good-bye, my dear, I must not stop any longer; I am nearly exhausted as it is." And with a sickly, wearied smile she departed, leaving the lonely, homeless girl on the brink of ruin, when one word of kindly warning from her lips might have saved her.

END OF BOOK III.

BOOK IV

“Hurry on, ye Wheels of Fate!”

CHAPTER XXVIII

“HURRY ON, YE WHEELS OF FATE!”

WHEN Rowland set his heart on the pursuit of any pleasure or business it became a matter of life and death. There was no happy medium with him; he threw his whole soul into anything he undertook, and never rested or gave others any rest until he had achieved his end and saw himself the master of his desire. This was indeed a praiseworthy gift, and it was a sad pity that his talents were not exercised in a worthier cause than the annulment of his former marriage.

The lawyers and detectives he employed for the building up of the case had a bad time of it. The stately slowness of the one surpassed the acute sharpness of the other; but the latter were not permitted much scope for their charming abilities. They were set to watch Mrs Hamilton Rowland, and to report her every movement that had the least breath of suspicion in it, and, unfortunately for their suit, she gave them but little trouble. She had taken up her residence with her mother soon after the last interview with her husband, and she continued there, a patient and dutiful nurse on a dying parent.

Whatever evidence of guilt they already possessed against her were insufficient in counsel's opinion to convict her of infidelity; this was irritating Rowland with the idea that he had not been fairly dealt with in judicial circles. He imagined that the Attorney-General

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who defended the case was his enemy, and likely to prove a victorious enemy in favour of his wife.

He had once been a warm and personal friend, and a frequent visitor at Kensington Palace Gardens ; but Rowland had met him since his return to town and had received a decided cut. Sir Edward Manby, a solicitor of the highest integrity, whose judgment and advocacy would have insured success to any legal case he undertook, had been already secured by Mrs Rowland, greatly to the chagrin and disgust of her husband, who would fain have bribed him with stupendous offers if he thought they would have been well received. But Sir Edward, the Attorney-General, was above bribery, and scorned even the acquaintance of a man who lived the fast life Rowland did. Most of the evidence already gleaned was from servants, who declared on oath they had seen Mrs Hamilton Rowland under suspicious circumstances with Mr Dale the co-respondent. Rowland's confidential valet, Hunt (of whom more shall be said later on), disclosed one or two stirring incidents, and his affidavit was regarded in a favourable light by Messrs Goreham of Ely Place, who, after six weeks' clear thinking and studying of the case, were in a position to inform their client that the matter would be dealt with *in camera* very shortly.

This was satisfactory so far ; but " All's well that ends well," and the end had yet to come when the court was ready to sit in judgment over the matrimonial difference.

Since his departure from The Homestead he had lived very quietly in his own house, seeing no one, and denying himself to all callers. He thought this proceeding wise and prudent, and therefore adhered to it with his usual fidelity. Though the season was at its height he took little, if any, share in the gaieties. His mind, when not busy with the oracles in Ely Place, was fully occupied in the furnishing of a country house he had taken in Worcestershire, where he hoped ultimately to carry

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Meta and spend his second honeymoon. The contemplation of so delightful a prospect gave him much pleasant food for meditation. He was conning over the designs his steward had sent him one evening about a week after his return to London, when Hunt, his valet, entered with a pile of letters that had just arrived by the last post.

“Ah, that is right, Hunt,” said Rowland, cheerfully. “I wonder now if there is any good news there amongst all that heap?”

“Don’t know, sir,” returned the servant, respectfully. “There are one or two perhaps that may be important.” And Hunt smiled intelligently, as if he knew his master’s secrets pretty well.

He was a man of middle height, dressed faultlessly as a gentleman’s gentleman should be; he had a clear-cut face of dark complexion; his manner was quiet and inscrutable, and he moved with the noiseless tread of a tiger cat. He had served Rowland from his earliest youth and knew him better than any other man living. Rowland often swore by him, and was heard to declare on more than one occasion that he would willingly stake his life on Hunt’s loyalty and devotion. Both these qualities were about to be put to the test in the coming divorce suit, for Hunt was to be sworn in as witness and had many important revelations to make concerning his former mistress. He had seen her with his own eyes under very suspicious circumstances, and his affidavit constituted the strongest proof against the defendant. This faithful adherent was, of course, cognisant of his master’s latest infatuation; he had attended Rowland during his long visit at The Homestead, and saw and understood all that had passed there and how necessary it was that the *decree nisi* should be pronounced in Rowland’s favour.

He entered now and placed the letters on the small table at Rowland’s elbow, arranging them so that they could be easily got at; then observing that the other

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was too intent on smoking and on studying the contents of a furniture catalogue to greet him with further conversation he left the room as noiselessly as he had entered.

No sooner was the door shut than Rowland fell to the opening of his letters. There were several bills from unpaid hatters, tailors, and a jeweller in Bond Street, who begged to be excused for reminding the honourable gentleman of a trifling sum of £200 odd that were due, etc. He put these aside impatiently as utterly of no interest, and turned his attention to another, which looked like a private letter, and the handwriting of which seemed familiar. This was what met his astonished eyes :—

“I, George Augustus Dale, beg to compliment the Hon. John Hamilton Rowland on his divorce case now pending. I think him the greatest blackguard that ever existed, and as soon as the affair is over and *He Has Failed* of his intention to ruin the honest and noble woman of whom he is the unworthy husband, I will give him the challenge that no English gentleman can refuse without sullyng his escutcheon and stamping on himself the unmistakable brand of coward.

“To be forewarned is to be forearmed. So I give him my word in time.—His, in all contempt and loathing,

“G. A. D.

“(His present Co-respondent).

“What an unmitigated ass!” breathed Rowland, turning livid with passion as he stared at the uncomplimentary document.

It would have fared badly with George Augustus Dale at that moment had he been within arms’ length of Rowland.

The letter, however, was torn into shreds and consigned to the waste-paper basket and to oblivion.

There were several other notes needing attention, and he returned to these with recovered equanimity. A

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small perfumed envelope, the caligraphy so shaky and undecided as almost to defy recognition, riveted his interest. The post-mark bore the stamp, London, E.C., on it. He tore it open wondering if this was another of the many effusions he had recently received from “La Belle Marguerite” reproaching him for his chronic neglect. The first thing that he saw was the large printed address:—

AVONDALE HOTEL,
Surrey Street, Strand.

It was from Meta. His momentary gleam of pleasure gave place to disappointment when he noticed how few the lines were; then again astonishment predominated over every other feeling as he read it.

“MY DEAR ROWLAND”(the note ran), —“I left The Homestead this morning and have taken rooms at the above address until I know what I had better do. The Balfours wished me to leave through some misunderstanding, which I shall be very glad to explain to you if you will come and see me. I have already commenced to feel very lonely, so shall look forward to your speedy visit. Come soon.—Yours faithfully, with love,
“M. B.”

“What in the name of heaven did it all mean?” he exclaimed aloud in his perplexity.

“Did you call, sir?” said a voice in the room, and looking up his eyes met those of Hunt.

“Call!” repeated Rowland, snappishly. “No, I did not call; but I shall be glad if you will hail a hansom for me, and look sharp about it.”

His voice trembled with emotion, and the hand which held poor Meta’s lonely appeal shook so from suppressed excitement that Hunt in his inscrutable manner divined the cause; he had not pre-examined that special envelope for nothing.

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In much shorter time than it takes me to write it, Rowland found himself getting into a two-wheeler with Hunt anxiously in attendance and inquiring if his master had received bad news.

"No, no," replied Rowland, hastily. "It is not bad news exactly, Hunt; I shall tell you all about it when I come back."

"Where to, sir?" said the driver through the spy-hole.

"To the Strand, East Embankment," was the reply.

He was not quite sure whether it would be wise to divulge the name of the hotel he was about to visit. He had Meta's honour in his hand, and a devilish fear rankling in his heart that she had done the most indiscreet, most unsophisticated and wildest thing that a young woman can be capable of doing in thus throwing herself into her lover's power—and that lover John Hamilton Rowland.

CHAPTER XXIX

AT THE AVONDALE HOTEL

"SHE must be mad, mad, mad," he repeated to himself as he was borne smoothly along through the beautifully lighted streets, and again and again casting his eyes on the innocent little note that was the cause of all this perturbation. "My God! to think that she should go to an hotel of all places, and then coolly send word for me to come and see her. Why, she can't realise the mischief she is doing herself! By Jove! what in the devil's name can she have done to make the Balfours desire her to leave in this uncereemonious fashion?"

At the Avondale Hotel

Balfour knows of my intentions towards her. Surely he would never allow her to be unfairly treated ! It must be his cursed wife and sister ; possibly some jealous spite on their part. Women are so abominably nasty to each other when there is a lover in the case. I will never forgive them if I find they have been rude to her." Here his passion had reached the boiling pitch when further reasoning of a coherent nature was utterly impossible, so he passed the next ten minutes in hurrying on his driver, who accordingly whipped up his horse and tore along at such a tremendous rate that he was stopped by a policeman on duty and reprimanded.

When the Embankment was at last reached he stopped the man, got out, gave him five shillings for his trouble, told the grinning Jehu that he did not drive half fast enough to please him, policeman or no policeman, and then went on his way through Temple Gardens, and up that endless street, called the Strand until he found himself face to face with the Avondale Hotel, Surrey Street.

It was a fairly high-class family hotel, frequented by the upper middle-class, quiet in its way, and thoroughly respectable all round. Roland knew this, having heard of friends who had stopped there from time to time, and who had gone away highly recommending it to others for comfort and good management. He himself had never been inside the building, but as he ascended the steps and rang the bell he could not help looking about him and feeling strangely pleased at the idea of his visiting Meta in such a place and so late in the evening.

A waiter came forward and politely asked him his business.

Rowland replied in a low voice that he had come to see a lady of the name of Benson, who, he believed, had arrived there that day. The lady expected him, he said ; would the waiter kindly show him the way up ? The man immediately complied, and Rowland, with his heart thumping very loud, followed him.

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They ascended the first flight of stairs, and passed through a wide corridor with rooms on each side, then through another, at the extremity of which was a curtained recess, where the waiter bade Roland wait until he had ascertained whether Miss Benson could see him or not.

"What name shall I give, if you please sir?" he demanded, as an after-thought

"Mr Hamilton," was the prompt reply.

Raising the curtain, the man knocked at the door and entered the room in response to a "Come in" from within. Almost immediately afterwards he returned and announced, "Mr Hamilton."

Rowland found himself in a large, square, well-furnished room, and saw the object of his love coming forward to receive him. She was attired in a flowing tea-gown of cream cashmere, which, however, did not detract from the grace of her figure; her eyes wore a startled expression and her cheeks were unwontedly rosy with the pleasure (he thought) of seeing him again.

"My dearest," he murmured, and as soon as they were safely alone he had taken her in his arms and was calling her a hundred fond names—all his rage, perplexity and displeasure forgotten in the mere sense of her presence.

"Why," said Meta, when she was allowed to speak, "why did you not give your own name?"

"Hamilton is my name. I have my reasons, which I shall explain later on, for not giving that of Rowland." He looked at her again with a strange expression in his eyes, which she thought decidedly peculiar; it embarrassed her, and with an air of offended dignity she threw back her head, drew away a little from him, saying, with a nervous tremor in her voice,—

"I did not expect you to come so late in the evening. Why did you come?"

"I lost my head when I got your astonishing letter, and came to see you on the spur of the moment."

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"On the spur of your desire, you mean," she retorted, smiling now at the pleasant compliment implied in his words. After all, he was her lover, and naturally his anxiety to see and have speech with her under such circumstances compelled him to act thus imprudently. "Did I do wrong to come here?" she asked in her sweetest and most insinuating manner. "I was quite puzzled to know what to do. There was no time to consult you. I was all in a fever to leave The Homestead before I lost my temper completely with everybody there; and then I thought I would stay here where you could come and see me without let or hindrance." She smiled bewitchingly in his face and was again taken aback with the peculiar expression on it. Rowland's dilated pupils grew more bright and more intensely passionate as he gazed on her and noted to himself her changeable manner. "She has the taint of the *demi mondaine* in her," were his impure thoughts. "She is either very deep or very innocent. In either case she may pass for my mistress, but never as my wife."

Whilst this dishonourable reflection was passing in his mind, Meta, with a slight shiver, left his side, and going to another corner of the room, where there was a settee, seated herself thereon with an air at once sad and disappointed. It was gradually dawning on her that she had acted wrongly and imprudently, and that this accounted for the strangeness in Rowland's manner. She heartily wished at that moment she had sought Mrs Falkner's kindness and protection; it would have been much the wiser course. There were tears in her eyes as she remembered the way she had repulsed the Vicar's kindness in offering her hospitality with his mother as her friend. She had felt lonely and depressed throughout the whole day, and the sight of Rowland had given her a momentary filip of delight. Now, behold, he was not quite pleased with her; at anyrate he seemed strangely unlike himself, and evidently

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wondering at her indiscretion and departure from the beaten track of propriety; of course it was improper for her to receive him so late in the evening—it was compromising to say the least of it. How to get out of this dilemma was now her trouble, and she began to cry, her only resource as a weak and loving woman. Rowland saw the tears and the sight softened him. His unjust suspicions vanished like frost-work, and he betook himself to the sofa and gently comforted her.

“What in the name of heaven has happened to induce you to leave The Homestead so suddenly?” he began, not angrily, but putting the question as a sort of opening to the explanation he was longing to have. “Your letter,” he continued, “was a bolt from the blue to me. I never felt so shot in my life!”

Meta did not know what a “bolt from the blue” meant, but the tone of his voice was conciliatory, so, summoning all her courage and forbearance, she commenced to give him an epitome of all that had occurred at the garden-party, and ended by saying that the Balfours had actually suspected her of forgery!

“Forgery!” repeated Rowland, wondering if he had heard aright or whether she had gone clean out of her senses.

“Well, if not forgery with something equally bad,” returned Meta, regaining her natural high spirits from the sheer instinct of self-defence. “I do now believe, if Mr Falkner had not warned me in time, I should have been most disgracefully, most unjustifiably exposed to—”

“Falkner,” reiterated Rowland, with frowning brows. “What business was it of his to interfere? You have not been seeing very much of him, have you?”

Meta shook her head. “Only at the garden-party,” she replied. Before, however, she could continue with her story, there was a knock at the door, and Rowland hastily left the sofa and stationed himself with his back to the mantelpiece as Meta gave permission to enter.

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It was the manageress of the hotel come to inquire if Miss Benson had everything she required for the night.

She was a stout, matronly woman with a keen, alert expression of countenance, and, like the class she belonged to, she was not above suspicion or curiosity. Her chief purpose was to see who the visitor was that had ventured to call on the young lady so late in the evening.

"Oh, come in, Mrs Fenton," said Meta, pleasantly—to Rowland's infinite surprise—for the cordiality of the tone betokened a previous acquaintance; and she had not told him yet that she knew Mrs Fenton well. "You see I am not alone? A friend of mine has come to see me."

"I must apologise," said Mrs Fenton, good-humouredly, "but I want to know if you are comfortable and snug before I go to bed. You see" (turning to Rowland), "I knew Miss Benson well from a child. Her father, Colonel Benson, used to take these very rooms for months at a time when he was on furlough, and Miss Meta was in and out and quite at home here." And Mrs Fenton honoured Rowland with a broad stare that took in his personality exhaustively. She justified herself in doing so, for she felt as if Meta was under her special care and protection.

Whether Rowland was glad to hear her statements it was impossible to say; he courteously bowed, expressing his hopes that Mrs Fenton would look well after Meta, and that he was glad she was so safely housed.

Mrs Fenton then took leave, telling this unconventional young lady that she would look in again later on, and hoped she would not tire herself by sitting up too late.

"Is she not nice?" said Meta, when they were again alone. "I did not know what to do when I left the Balfours this morning. I did not like going to my aunt, for she treated me so shabbily when I was there last time, and my father's house, of course, is forbidden ground, and then suddenly it occurred to me that I would come to Mrs Fenton and take these very rooms,

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which are quite familiar to me, my father having stayed here so often in days gone by. She was quite glad to see me, and to my joy told me that this suite was vacant. I arranged to stay a week or two until I know what plans I had best make. I am paying only five pounds a week *en pension*. Remarkably cheap, is it not ? ” And she seemed very pleased with her astuteness, and looked to him for approval.

He laughed shortly : he was amused at her simplicity. Five pounds a week ! he thought ; why, he paid that and more a day to ensure himself even the ordinary necessities of existence. All his old fondness for her, his previous trust and belief in her innocence, returned ; she was a girl only, only sweeter and simpler than anything he had ever seen in girlhood ; and the amusement of it all was, she was actually pluming herself on being a woman of the world.

He came and seated himself again beside her, and drawing her affectionately to him, said, “ I don’t think I ever can find it in my heart to be angry with anything that you do,” and finished his speech with very lover-like kisses.

Meta submitted and thus felt happy again. She had reckoned on his love and sympathy, and she had all but lost both through her rash impulse in taking rooms at an hotel. She commenced telling him the rest of her story, to which he listened with wandering attention, his thoughts were elsewhere.

Suddenly he looked at his watch ; it was a quarter to eleven.

“ By Jove ! ” he interrupted, “ I must get out of this, or else that woman will be coming in again to turn me out bodily ! It is a wrench to part from you, sweetheart, but I shall see you again to-morrow.”

“ And you are not displeased with me for being alone here ? ” she asked anxiously.

“ I am not displeased now,” he said. “ But I still think you ought to have someone with you.” Then he

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reflected a few minutes in silence whilst she patiently waited for him to speak. "How would it do," he proposed at last, "if I were to engage a staid married woman to wait on you whilst you are here? It would then appear more *comme il faut*, and I should also be more easy in my mind about you. I know an exceedingly superior and highly-respectable female, the wife of my valet; she would come, I think, at a minute's notice. Do you like the idea?"

"Yes," replied Meta, delighted at the thought of having a first-class maid at her beck and call, "I should like it very much."

"The matter is settled then, and I will ask Mrs Hunt to come to you to-morrow," he said conclusively; then, bidding her a lover-like adieu, he took his leave with his mind in a chaos as to the general uncertainty of his position with her, and the nightmare of a possible failure in his pending divorce suit.

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE MESHES OF THE SERPENT

As Rowland returned to his house he felt very much like the good boy in the story-book, who had behaved his best and had received a prize for the good conduct that leads to honour.

After all, as things were, it was as well that Meta had taken rooms in an hotel rather than gone to 4 Tudor Road, where he could never have seen her, and might possibly have lost her, if Miss Wilton took it into her head to inquire too closely into his antecedents. Meta, he knew, never read a newspaper, or troubled herself at all about Society gossip and scandal, so that it

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was easy to keep her in the dark ; and she was not one to question either. He was more in love with her than ever now that she had ostensibly put herself into his power, and he commenced to worry himself with the idea that she would perhaps get to hear of this divorce case somehow or other, and then he would lose her and all chances of ever being happy again.

He worked himself into a fever about it, and, like all passionate men accustomed to have their own way in life, nearly shed tears at such a possibility. When he reached his dressing-room he was in that state of mind when an unburdening of his trouble was absolutely necessary, and his faithful valet was not long in the room with him before he heard the whole story. The man's quiet, respectful bearing, so replete with intelligence and sympathy, was just what Rowland needed in his present dilemma. Rowland impressed on Hunt the necessity of concealing the current state of affairs from Miss Benson, and then told him that the young lady was without a waiting-woman, and that he had already mentioned his wife's name as a suitable person to fill the office. Hunt, of course, immediately complied, with the assurance that his wife would be delighted to be of service to his master.

"Could she go to-morrow?" Rowland asked anxiously.

"I will desire her to do so," replied the valet, in a voice that plainly indicated the unquestionable submission of Mrs Hunt to his marital authority.

"Instruct her, please, to show all respect to Miss Benson, but to keep close on matters concerning my private affairs. For instance," he continued with heightened colour, "Miss Benson is under the impression that I am a widower, and knows nothing of the pending suit ; let her remain under that impression ; I will myself undeceive her when the right time comes."

As Meta was breakfasting the next morning she was

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agreeably surprised by the entrance of a pleasant-looking woman, somewhere about thirty years old, quietly and neatly dressed in black. This woman announced herself as Mrs Hunt. She presented a note from Rowland, which was eagerly scanned, whilst she quickly and unobtrusively took in the *ensemble* of her young mistress. Rowland's short note ran thus :—

“MY DEAREST,—The bearer of this note is the woman I have chosen to attend you for the present. She is, as I told you, wife to my faithful valet, and will, I know, be as devoted in your services as her husband is in mine. I wish you never to go out alone whilst you are in town, but allow her always to accompany you. She will do anything you wish. I will come and dine with you at eight o'clock, and will bring Hunt to wait on us, so that our conversation need not be restricted, as it would naturally be in the presence of a strange waiter. So give your orders accordingly, and look forward to a pleasant evening with your ever-devoted and faithful lover,
J. H. R.

“P.S.—I am sending you a present of fruit and flowers by Hunt. Matters of urgent business will prevent my coming before the evening.”

Meta looked up from the reading of this letter and met the eyes of her new maid. There was a tone of possession in Rowland's effusion which caused her cheeks to flush uncomfortably, and a momentary feeling of doubt startled her into the suspicion that this stranger woman was looking askance at her and wondering as to her exact relations with Rowland. Certainly the position was questionable. All the girl's pride rose up in arms at the thought, and it was in her mind there and then to dismiss the woman and tell her there was some mistake in Mr Rowland having engaged her, when Mrs Hunt's pleasant voice in-

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interrupted her mental debate and changed the course of her plans.

"I hope, miss," she said respectfully, "you will find me satisfactory. I was a lady's-maid to the Countess of Hopetoun for five years before I married Mr Hunt, so I am quite at home with the duties."

There was really something fascinating in the idea of having a maid who had once done duty to a beautiful and celebrated countess, and Meta could not resist the feeling of complacency with which she received the statement. It was balm to her wounded pride. Her manner was almost gracious as she made reply.

"Your duties with me will be comparatively light," she added. "I am going out this morning to do some shopping, and I should like you to come with me."

Later on she sent for Mrs Fenton, and arranged for a very snug dinner in her own private sitting-room. She also ordered a bed to be put up in the small dressing-room adjoining her bed-chamber for Mrs Hunt's accommodation. There was a very handsome drawing-room included in the suite, which Meta now engaged for her private use in addition to the dining-room, where she had the night before received Rowland. She spent more than an hour that morning arranging the flowers in vases, and embellished both apartments to her heart's content. A feeling of elation possessed her at the idea of being mistress of the whole suite. To her mind it seemed like the first rung in the ladder of social triumph.

Her delight was at its climax when about twelve in the morning Hunt appeared with a message from his master that she was on no account to do her shopping on foot, but to make use of the barouche he, Hunt, had driven in, and which was now at the door awaiting her pleasure.

“I will not have your Father told!”

CHAPTER XXXI

“I WILL NOT HAVE YOUR FATHER TOLD!”

SHE made good use of her carriage that morning, and with the help of her maid purchased a very handsome tea-gown at Swan & Edgar's. Mrs Hunt was invaluable in her experience, and made several suggestions as to colour, taste and style of this new concoction. She also took infinite pains in dressing her young mistress for the evening, and arranged her hair exquisitely. Whilst thus engaged she impressed on Miss Benson the memory of that sublime past when her deft hands had attired the lovely young countess whose tasteful toilet had roused the envy of half the fine women in London. Meta, as she listened and gazed into the cheval glass, thought that Rowland would have reason to be pleased with her appearance, for, indeed, she looked a charming picture in her pink satin tea-gown with its soft *plastron* of cream lace. She was delighted with herself, and more than delighted with her attendant, whose services she received to the manner born.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Rowland, when he saw her, “you look stunning!” The words were blunt, certainly, but they pleased her girlish vanity, which was gratified to its utmost when he laughingly produced from his coat pocket a small parcel and asked her to guess its contents.

“A bracelet?” she returned merrily.

“Right you are. There, madam, I think this will suit you.” And he disclosed to her view the jewel in question. It was a triple serpent bracelet with large glowing rubies for eyes and the surface beset with diamonds. It was the handsomest present she had yet

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received from him, and when he had clasped it round her wrist she was lost in admiration of its intrinsic beauties.

"Well," he said, laughing, "am I to receive no thanks for it?"

Slowly she lifted up her face to give the expected kiss, her cheeks rosy with pleasure, and her eyes dancing with gratified desire. The sight of the diamonds had roused all the ambition of a woman's nature. She felt she could not receive too many of such sparkling, brilliant gems; there would always be an insatiate call for more, more, more.

She gave him her thanks affectionately; then they sat together on the sofa, and she favoured him with a lengthy account of how she had spent the day, until dinner was announced.

She was at her best during the repast, chatting cleverly on from one topic and another: her wish ostensibly was to show him how well she could entertain as hostess, and she succeeded grandly. After dinner she sang and played to him, whilst he listened and praised her when she had finished. She joined him on the couch, whither he had thrown himself.

"Do you remember," she asked, laughingly, "the very first time you heard me at The Homestead? You sat right away and did not even condescend to thank me. I went to bed that night thinking you the most disagreeable man I had ever met. My first impressions were not favourable, you see."

He took her hand and kissed it. "I was hard hit even then," said he. "Whilst I sat comparatively silent and thankless there on the balcony I was gazing at you and admiring you with all my heart and soul. There was not a feature, a curve of your sweet neck, an expression of face or form, or the smallest detail of your white dress, that was lost upon me. I treasured every beauty in my memory and went to rest to dream of you, my love that was to be."

“I will not have your Father told!”

“How strange, how unaccountable is the passion of love!” breathed Meta, solemnly. Some remembrance of her own first tenderness for Falkner intruded itself. She blushed at the thought, it seemed so like disloyalty to Rowland; yet he, Robert Falkner himself, had ennobled her by his love; surely there was still pain in that thought and in the memory of her refusing him.

“It is indeed,” affirmed Rowland in reply to her remark. “Love is heavenly when requited—when the lover lives in hopes of a speedy consummation of his passion—but it is hell, torture, madness inexpressible when there is no hope and love still lives on in lonely disappointment and misery. Oh, Meta, I trust I shall be spared such torment on your account!” His intense emotion moved him almost to tears. He clasped her to him passionately. “Promise me,” he cried, “that you will never voluntarily cause me that pain, for oh, I could not bear it! It would kill me.”

“Do you love me so much as all that, you poor dear Jack?” said she, endeavouring to lighten his earnestness by an assumption of humour. Somehow she could not respond to his feelings, though she was touched by his tender expression of them. “Tell me, Rowland, have you ever loved and found you loved in vain because there was a barrier on the other side that prevented your love being requited?” She asked the question with tense eagerness, and was rather astonished at the guilty start and look he gave.

Did she suspect his position, he asked himself, that she spoke of a barrier as existing?

Meta’s suspicion, on the contrary, was that his evident embarrassment was due to the very palpable fact that he had loved and lost without his passion being requited, and that possibly, like many men in his position, he had been the hero of several *grandes passions*. The flash of intelligence displeased her, and she drew away her hand from his.

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"What barrier do you mean?" he demanded huskily. "I know of no barrier to prevent my loving you, and you know it also."

The latter influence was a prompter: his anxiety was to ascertain if she suspected his perfidy. She, however, understood it differently. After all, she was not his first and only love, but only a fleeting fancy like many other past and similar experiences. The thought humbled her in her own self-esteem: there was no pleasure in the sure knowledge that she was only one of his (polygenous) *affaires des cœur*.

"Am I your first love, Meta? Have you cared for anyone else before you cared for me?"

The girl shuddered. His question coming so suddenly and unexpectedly, bewildered her. She answered as truthfully as it was in her to do.

"Dear Rowland, if you mean that I have ever accepted any man's love before I met you, I can truly and positively say 'No.' But you, Jack—I am afraid cannot vouch the same thing to me?"

"There is love and love," said he, pleased with the hidden jealousy couched in her words. "You are my first and the only beloved of my heart. I have never felt for anyone as I have felt towards you."

"And your dead wife, Rowland—did you never love her?"

He gasped. "By Jove, Meta, you need not be jealous of her memory! Our marriage was a *mariage de convenance*, arranged by my father when I was barely one-and-twenty. I had nothing to do with the choice of her, and I certainly never thought of loving her. It was a social arrangement and nothing more."

"And how long have you been a—?"

He guessed her coming query and interrupted her adroitly. "Dearest, if you love me, do not speak of it. I never think of her without bitterness, and it pains me to hear you mention her. Please let us drop the subject."

“I will not have your Father told!”

She smiled, not at all reluctant to comply. She was after all his first love, and she did not care to press the question further.

“You have never told me whether you liked Mrs Hunt or not? Do you think she will suit you?”

“Oh, Jack, I cannot tell you how delighted I am with her! She is a treasure; and I feel so proud to have her for my maid. Will she be able to remain with me when I am your wife?”

She blushed vividly at the last word, and he laughed and took a lover’s liberty of kissing the roses away. “Of course she shall remain with you as long as you like. I must arrange to marry you immediately.”

“I think it would be necessary to tell my father, Jack; he ought to know,” she proposed timidly.

The smiling expression of Rowland’s countenance changed into that of instant displeasure. “I will not have him to meddle with the affair,” he burst out sternly. “I will not have your father told. You are of age, and can act for yourself.”

“But still he is my father, and I am his only child; and I think he would forget past grievances if he knew I was going to be married happily. I must have someone to give me away. I thought at one time I could do anything to spite him, but I cannot do this and yet expect a blessing on this most important change in my life. Besides, I shall lose my dowry if I marry without his consent and knowledge.”

“How much is it?” asked Rowland, abruptly, his emotions very much at variance with each other.

“Five thousand pounds,” replied Meta. “It was my mother’s marriage portion, and she directed in her will that I should have it handed it over to me on my wedding-day, on condition that my father approved and consented to my choice of a husband.”

“Do you mean to say,” burst out her lover, furiously, “that Colonel Benson has had the meanness to retain the whole income of that money without offering you

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an allowance all the three years you have been out as governess? I call it a devilish shame then, and the less you have to do with him the better."

"I offended him very deeply about his wife," said Meta. "He thought he had a right to disown me, I suppose, under those circumstances."

"He is a brute!" exclaimed Rowland, dogmatically. "If he can treat you so shabbily, and cherish resentment against his only child for three long years, he is not worthy of the name of father. I should not thank him for giving you to me, and I don't want any of your relatives to come hopping round you when you are my wife. They will be sure to do so when you are a rich woman, because they think they can get something out of you. I despise all time-serving, mercenary relations. They are the plagues of the earth. You shall not lose your dowry; I will make over to you as a deed of gift the sum of ten thousand pounds. You shall have the use of the income of that money besides the thousand or two a year pin-money I shall allow you when you are Mrs Jack. Will that satisfy you, sweetheart?"

She clapped her hands in childish glee. "You are so good, so generous, you darling!" she cried impulsively. "I think I am the luckiest girl in the world to have won your love!"

He then changed the subject, and confided to her his cherished dreams of their united life, and the exceedingly pretty house he had taken in Worcester for the honeymoon.

"I had no idea," he said, "I should have you so near to consult with regarding its furnishing and decoration. Now you can give me one or two valuable hints."

"Oh, Jack, let me have a boudoir just like the one at Kensington Palace Gardens which belonged to your mother! Do you recollect how delighted I was with its blue and silver painting? And that charming picture of her with her infant in her arms? I think it was the

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sight of that sweet baby that made me first think of loving you. And then how good you were when I pricked my finger. You kissed and made it well again." She laughed gaily at the recollection, and the rest of their conversation we leave to the imagination of those intellectual minds who have been in love and know precisely what it's like.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SOUL'S AWAKENING

THE next morning Jack Rowland received a long apologetic letter from his friend Balfour, giving him his version of Meta's departure from The Homestead, and the sundry reasons why such a course had come to be absolutely necessary.

"My wife tells me that Miss Benson is now with her aunt," wrote his correspondent. "This is wise of her, as it will materially prevent her being talked about. Your attentions to her gave food for much conversation in the parish. Therefore it is as well that she is under the protection of her relatives. We have had great trouble with Winifred : she is in a passion of grief and rage at the sudden flight of her beloved Meta, and gives us no peace with her bewailings. News has just arrived of Mrs Falkner's dangerous illness. The old lady took a severe chill on the day of the garden-party, and is down with rheumatic fever. Her life is despaired of. Our Vicar has summoned a brother clergyman to do his duty for him, as all his time is passed at his mother's sick-bed. He sends me a note asking me for Miss Benson's address ; his mother, he says, has expressed a fervent wish to see that young lady. Would I kindly send it by bearer ?

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I have written to say that Miss Benson left no address. I thought it best to say this for your sake, though it does not sound well. I believe you do not care for any interference from that quarter. You will communicate this news to Miss Benson if you think it wise that she should know of it. My wife and sister beg to be remembered to her. I am making arrangements to go to the Continent immediately. Travel and change will, I hope, prevent Winifred from constant fretting after her beloved Miss Benson. We are all going, so that The Homestead will be shut up for the summer. Tell me your plans, and accept again my very best wishes for your happiness."

Rowland read this letter under protest; he would have liked to quarrel outright with the Balfours, but on second consideration thought it wiser not to do so. It was very evident that they all believed Meta to be with her aunt, and he was not going to undeceive them about it.

He wrote a courteous enough reply to his friend, advising the immediate tour to the Continent as a grand sedative for Winifred's trouble. "He had seen Miss Benson, who, as the Balfours rightly surmised, was now residing with friends in town."

He informed Meta of all the news concerning The Homestead folks; but he kept back the intelligence of Mrs Falkner's illness. His jealousy of Robert Falkner still rankled, and he had a presentiment that the girl was unduly interested in anything concerning the parson.

"One never knows," he reflected; "women are so foolish. She would be wanting to go and help to nurse the old lady, or some such nonsense."

It was on Meta's lips to inquire after the Parsonage folks, but an ominous frown from Rowland dissuaded her. She owed him indeed too much to wantonly displease him. True to his promise about the money to be

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invested in her name, he had that very morning put in her hands the securities for £10,000.

We are apt to forget ourselves in our moments of enjoyment, and think that it is all well with us, until the day of reckoning comes, and then we wake to realise the falseness of our seeming happiness.

Meta received a violent shock when, a week from the day of her arrival at the Avondale, the bill was sent up to her with Mrs Fenton's compliments. It amounted to £35, 10s. 6d.

At first the astonished girl thought that her eyes were deceiving her, and she stared closely at the paper for a whole minute before she could believe it. But there it was as distinctly as the manageress's handwriting could make it. £35, 10s. 6d. was the sum total.

"She must be imposing upon my inexperience," thought Meta, angrily, and in a great rage she commenced to read the items carefully, with an inward determination to dispute the amount before paying it.

In the first place the suite of rooms alone came to £5 a week; each meal that was served in the private room was charged at the rate of half-a-crown a meal; Rowland's daily dining at the hotel was reckoned at a guinea a head; the wines and champagne drank at both luncheon and dinner amounted to the very reasonable sum of £7, 10s; luncheons for the week at £2, 10s; breakfasts and teas, £1, 10s.; and the keep of the lady's maid, £2, 10s.

How was she to pay the bill out of her own pocket when she had extravagantly spent almost all her money on dress? She had barely £10 of the generous sum Mrs Balfour had given her the night before she left The Homestead. She hated the thought of having to ask Rowland for the money, and yet there seemed no other resource; for of course, now when she came to consider the bill and remembered the *recherche* little dinners she had ordered, and the wines and other luxuries that had been consumed without stint, the account seemed just

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enough, and it must be settled that very day. She wondered if Rowland had any idea of the expenses she was incurring through entertaining him? He was coming that very morning at eleven o'clock to drive her out in his phaeton, and then he intended to stay to luncheon. One thing was very evident—she must not only consult him about the hotel bill, but also form some other more economical way of living until he was ready to marry her, for to live at his expense in the interim was out of the question.

Whilst she made her morning toilet Meta conned over the difficulties of the interview before her, and the more she thought over it the less she liked it. She was naturally proud as she was sensitive, and she wondered if Mrs Hunt suspected the state of affairs; she reddened at the mere idea of it. No, she said to herself, the sooner she got out of the hotel the better; she was compromising herself most painfully, and the world's tongue would soon wag if she did not turn over a new leaf before matters became more complicated.

She waited impatiently for Rowland's arrival, and spent the time in restlessly moving from one sitting-room to another and staring out of the windows, as though to hasten his coming. The pleasure of being driven by him in his smart turn-out had died a natural death with the worry that was on her mind. And when at last she saw him driving up to the hotel, his two hands busily engaged in guiding a pair of the finest blood-horses in the kingdom, she felt she dreaded the interview more than ever, and wondered what he would think of her pecuniary difficulty and the proposal she had to make about leaving the hotel.

He entered the drawing-room, his countenance beaming with satisfaction.

"Good morning, Meta," said he, cheerfully. "What do you think of my pair?" taking her to the window. "Don't you think they are beauties? We shall have a

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first-rate drive. Don't you admire them?" he persistently asked, observing her indifferent air and wondering what was the matter.

"Yes," replied Meta, "they are very beautiful horses. But somehow or other I don't want to drive out to-day. I don't feel at all well, and I am worried."

"Worried?" he repeated. "What has worried you? You were all right last night. Your father hasn't heard of your stopping here, has he?"

"No, Jack; why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought perhaps Mrs Fenton might have apprised him accidentally, and there would be unpleasantness, of course. "He seemed annoyed and disappointed at her change of plan, and his face now looked almost sulky as he gazed listlessly out of the window.

"I suppose my father would think me wrong to stay here alone at an hotel and receive your visits without a chaperon and all that sort of thing? And I am sure he would be right to object, Rowland, for I am beginning to feel uncomfortable."

"You are tired of me already?" he said disgustedly. "I see, like all other women you have your tantrum fits. I quite believed you to be an exception to the rule."

"I don't know what you mean by tantrum fits," said Meta, with spirit. "I told you I was worried, and you never asked me the cause of my worry."

"I haven't had time to get over my disappointment about the drive," he returned, controlling himself with an effort, and moving away from the window to a seat near her. "Well, what is it, little woman? I am all attention."

"I have come to the conclusion, Rowland," began Meta, with impulsive haste, "that I must on no account stop here any longer. In the first place, I cannot afford it, and secondly, I believe I am doing a great deal of harm to myself. And, and—you understand, Rowland, what you yourself said about the impropriety of my

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remaining here alone, receiving your frequent visits and going about with you and all that. Well, I feel now that it is wrong and improper, I must not do it any longer."

"And what do you propose to do, Madam Grundy?" asked her lover, restraining a mocking smile at the unusual air of propriety she was assuming all of a sudden.

"I shall go to my aunt and tell her everything and ask her if she would accommodate me until—until you are ready to marry me. I think she would, and she would be very nice about it when she knows the desirable match I am going to make." Meta pronounced the last sentence with a proud look at her lover, and hoped it would please him and mollify the feeling of annoyance she knew he was then experiencing from her proposal.

"I should positively disapprove of your doing so," he returned huskily. "I have told you that before. Why can you not remain here until I am ready to marry you? It will be only for a very short time."

"But even then, Rowland, I could not comfortably marry you from an hotel. It is so expensive living here. Mrs Fenton sent me up this with my breakfast tray." She went to the table, where she had placed the bill, and handed it over to him, her face a burning crimson and her hands trembling with the agitation of the moment. He glanced carelessly at the sum total.

"Thirty-five pounds, ten shillings and sixpence. Is that all?" he asked, dropping the paper and then bursting into a laugh at the evident fright she was in. "Why, sweetheart, that is not so very much, considering the trouble and expense we have put the establishment to for a whole week!"

"But, Rowland, I could not possibly afford to live at such a rate," remonstrated Meta, anxious to know how he would deal with the circumstances now that she had completely unburdened her mind on the topic.

He rose and caught her to him. "Why, you foolish

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child !” said he, affectionately, “ you forget that you are as good as my wife, and that all I have is yours. Did you fancy for one moment that I was going to let you pay my wine and dinner-bills for every day of the week because I chose to invite myself here whenever so inclined ? You really are too innocent for this wicked world, and the sooner I train you for your future high position as the Viscountess Rowland the better, or Society will think me an unmitigated ass for letting you go about without proper leading-strings. Now understand once for all, my proud queen, that I am responsible for every penny in that bill, and that I am seriously in your debt, and will have nothing more to do with you unless you let me be your banker and dictate and arrange everything that concerns you from this day henceforth and for evermore.”

His tone of badinage and assumed light-heartedness did much to relieve poor Meta's burdened mind, but she was still tenacious to her first determination, and insisted that her aunt and father should be aware of her engagement.

“ Putting aside the spite you have against them for having treated me so shabbily in the past, I see no reason why they should not know—my aunt at least, if not my father,” said she, obstinately. “ I should not feel my isolated position so much, and it would not appear half so compromising in the world's opinion if it was a known fact that my aunt was coming frequently to see me, and that she countenanced your visits as my future husband.” Then, softening her manner a little, she added : “ Suppose, Rowland, I go into the country and reside in a private family until you are ready to marry me ? ”

“ Suppose you do nothing of the kind,” said he, angrily. “ If you like to go into the country in preference to stopping in London you shall go and live in our new house : it is all ready now, and I shall be free to come and see you as often as I like.”

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"But I cannot go and live in any of your houses before I have a legal right to do so," protested Meta. "It would be worse than living here at your expense."

Rowland did not reply : he walked to the window and stared out of it ; he felt like a man who has floated in mid-air for a long time and suddenly finds himself dropped on *terra firma*. Her fears of her false position were once his fears : what she so dreaded now and realised in its full measure had been realised by him on that first evening he had driven to see her in such hot haste, trembling with apprehension at the temptation she was putting in his way, and almost cursing the circumstances that had brought about such an evil. He had gone too far to draw back ; and she had committed herself too deeply to withdraw without a severe compromise to her self-respect. He fondly longed for an immediate realisation of his marriage with her ; but how was this to be accomplished since the hearing of his divorce suit was till indefinitely postponed for another three weeks or so ? And anything might happen in that space of time, he thought—anything to balk him of obtaining his wish, and plunge him into all the agony of disappointment.

If Meta were to force his hand there would be an end of the matter. Something must be done to achieve his hopes ; and that something dawned on him like the avenging angel of destruction eager to destroy, to hold him in its iron grasp. His very countenance blackened at the thought ; passion after passion possessed him like stormy waves surging against the breakers of his desire. Yes, he must have her, cost it what it may : she was born to be his ; the fate that bound him to her was stronger than that of death, of dishonour. Life would be hell, torture inexpressible were he to lose her. He had already paid so dearly for love of her.

How long he stood there, a prey to the wildest emotions, it was impossible to say ; a soft touch on his arm roused him from his reverie.

"Rowland," said Meta, tenderly, "have I grieved

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you? I am sorry that you should be so angry for what I thought was only reasonable for me to expect. Listen, Rowland. Since you say an immediate marriage is impossible, let me go to my aunt. She will give me a warmer welcome this time, I think, when I tell her about you and all my happy prospects." Meta smiled; she was anxious to dispel the gloom from his heart.

"No, no, Meta," he replied, and his voice rang strangely in her ears. "Do not think of any plan until—until I have thought it well over. An immediate marriage after all may not be impossible. Who knows but I may be able to arrange it in a day or two? And under the circumstances the sooner you are my wife and in my care the better. Meanwhile, my dearest, I will leave you; I must be alone to think it all out. Adieu, sweetest; trust to your lover: he only lives to make you happy."

"And that bill, Jack? I have only ten pounds in my possession," said Meta, as she received his farewell kiss.

He hastily thrust into her hand his pocket-book, and without waiting to receive her thanks, hurriedly left the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

"Where lies thy sorrow—thy secret care?
Hast thou some secret I cannot share?"

HER momentary sense of relief was swallowed up in the wonderment she felt at his strange behaviour. There was something so singularly odd about him, that an instinctive feeling of suspicion possessed her, and all manner of doubts came into her mind and made her feel sick with their insistent attacks on her once perfect faith in his honour. Had he indeed a secret that he could not

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share with her? If so, what was it? Why also should he insist on her engagement being kept dark? It could not be that he was ashamed of her relations, for she considered her father, as an officer of the 10th Hussars, quite as good as any gentleman in the kingdom. Her mother also had been of gentle birth, and was well-connected. His secret she had reason to believe concerned only himself, and was of a nature that would be best for her not to know.

Whilst she was thus pondering, Mrs Hunt entered and asked if Meta was going out that morning. The harassed girl shook her head and presented a countenance so troubled that the kind-hearted waiting-woman, much alarmed, hastily fetched a glass of wine from the adjoining room and made her mistress drink it.

"Thank you," said Meta, gratefully.

"You look quite done up, miss," remarked the woman, "this great heat must be trying you." She fanned Meta as she spoke, and beat up the sofa cushions for her to lean against.

As she received these attentions, Meta wondered if she would be right in questioning the woman regarding Rowland's past life. Her curiosity got the better of her scruples, and without hesitation she commenced with well-acted indifference.

"Mr Rowland has just gone. I was too ill to drive out with him as arranged. He seems much worried with something or other. I wonder what it can be? He would not tell me."

"Oh, it can be nothing, madam, nothing very important, or he would be sure to tell you," said Mrs Hunt, consolingly. "He is often put out in the mornings, and gets all right again in the evenings."

"I wanted so much to talk to him about his wife, and he forbade the subject," softly returned Meta. "How long has she been dead? They were not happy together, were they?"

Meta's becoming air of innocence deceived Mrs Hunt ;

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yet the woman was wary in her reply, and on the alert against being caught.

"They were the most miserable couple that ever breathed," she answered evasively, ignoring the first query. "It is only a wonder the master put up with her for so long. She had a temper like a Spaniard's and was for ever quarrelling with him."

"What was she like?" asked Meta, with pardonable curiosity.

"She was tall and fair, with red-gold hair, which I have heard is always the sign of a hot temper. We servants didn't care for her; she was so haughty and proud."

"Were you her maid?"

"No, indeed, madam. Mr Rowland had arranged that I should be the housekeeper when I married Mr Hunt, but mistress, she would not hear of it. She said I was too young and inexperienced for the post, and that an elderly woman would be more suitable; so, without giving me any proper warning, she tells me to give up my duties, as she had already got a highly superior managing sort of lady in the house—someone whom the servants *couldn't* put up with for love or money. My husband was very much vexed at this slight on me and nearly gave notice to go; but he is fond of the master and has been his valet from a boy, so when he told the master how hurt he was at the mistress' treatment of me, I got a year's salary given me in lieu of notice, and rooms in the town mansion so that I may be near my husband. There is nobody like the honourable Mr Rowland for acting like a gentleman to those who serve him faithfully."

"He is very generous to everybody," said Meta. "I hope when he comes this evening he will lose his worrying fit and be quite himself again. That reminds me, I have given no orders for to-day's dinner. Send Mrs Fenton up to me; I wish to settle her account at the same time."

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CHAPTER XXXIV

ON THE BRINK OF THE PRECIPICE

READER, have you ever stood on the summit of some steep hill, and in looking down the depth below feel as if you had suddenly lost your balance, and had fallen down, down that deathly height, ever falling, but never reaching the bottom, until the feeling turned you sick and you recede from the danger—that imaginary fall still fixed on your mind and benumbing your senses and rendering you as unlike yourself as it is possible to be? So men must feel when they are on the eve of committing some great crime, some moral and social suicide of the honour they have once held so dear and looked upon as their badge of nobility. They have stood on the same *perilous* brink; they have experienced the same sensation, and they have realised to its utmost all the horrors and discomforts of that downward career, and the realisation only leaves them dazed certainly, but callous to all future consequences.

Thus it was with Rowland; all through that day and the night that followed he turned over in his mind every available resource by which he could see a way out of his dilemma—and all pointed in one direction, the very thought of which made him tremble. His perturbation was such that it totally unfitted him for Meta's society that evening, and to avoid unpleasantness he sent a message by Hunt to say that he was unable to dine with her as usual but would visit her without fail the following day.

He passed a restless night, as may be imagined, but rang early the next morning for Hunt.

On the Brink of the Precipice

That worthy was not prepared to see his master, with flushed cheeks and fever-laden eyes, seated at his escritoire busily engaged writing letters. He feared something serious was about to happen, and his long acquaintance with Rowland's habits warned him to be extra quiet and respectful in his manner. He busied himself with his usual avocations, waiting until the honourable gentleman was ready to speak. He noticed that the bed in the chamber was unpressed, and that things looked very much as if a long and sleepless night had been passed.

"There is plenty to be done to-day, Hunt," said Rowland at last, without looking up from his writing. "And I want you to look sharp and do it. I know I can trust to your fidelity and devotion, can I not?"

There was a ring of doubt in the nervous voice which grated on the faithful servant's susceptibilities.

"Sir," was the dignified reply, "I have served you this fifteen years and more, and I don't remember your once having to find fault with me. I am willing to obey your every order to the letter."

"That is true enough," replied Rowland, thoughtfully, "and I was a fool to question it. You have ever been a true friend and servant to me, Hunt, and now I am about to try you to the uttermost. I shall make it worth your while to obey me." He paused as though considering his words; his nervousness was very palpable, and when he did continue after a long silence, each sentence was jerked out painfully, as though he were thoroughly ashamed of the orders he was giving. "In the first place," said he, "you are to set about immediately and engage a competent staff of servants, and take them to this Worcester house of mine; you will establish them there in readiness for our coming. You will see that the house and grounds are, as my steward tells me, in apple-pie order. You will also take carriages and horses there, but none of the stable servants from the mews here. Engage a new coachman and two grooms; more help can be procured later on as we need them.

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You will make the servants understand that their master's name is Hamilton ; and I wish you to arrange everything for Mrs Hamilton's comfort—you know whom I mean ? Above all things you will keep a still tongue in your head, and impress on the new servants the greatest respect possible for Mrs Hamilton. You understand ?”

“Perfectly, sir ; and you may depend on my carrying out your directions minutely.”

“There is your wife,” continued Rowland, somewhat doubtfully. “Is she to be trusted ?—to be depended upon for the strictest secrecy ?”

“I can answer for Mrs Hunt with my life, sir. There is not another in your household, next to myself, more true, more desirous to serve you well than she is.”

“Impress upon her, please, the need of the greatest prudence. She is to precede us to-morrow to Worthley, to receive Miss Benson as Mrs Hamilton, and to pay her every duty and attention as if she were my wife. She is to ask no questions of her mistress, but to accept the fact of her position as a fact and nothing more. She can also direct the other servants in the establishment and make them understand that Mrs Hamilton is my wife and their lawful mistress. There must not be the smallest misunderstanding about this. I trust to you to set right the most trifling matter concerning the Worthley household, and to be ready to receive us to-morrow forenoon. Can you manage it ?” concluded Rowland, imperiously.

Hunt bowed and repeated his promise of obedience.

“Here are notes to the amount of £400. £100 you can keep for yourself, the rest are to meet current expenses. Set about looking for the new servants as soon as the registry offices are open, and take them with you by the mid-day train to Worcester. I shall not require your personal attendance again until I see you to-morrow at Worthley Station. Be sure and see your wife before you go. Perhaps she can assist you in engaging the servants.”

On the Brink of the Precipice

Hunt bowed again. There was not the smallest indication in his manner that he was in the least bit ruffled by the multitude of directions he had received.

An hour afterwards Rowland was out on horseback for the further carrying out of his intrigue; there were secret matters to arrange which no human being could help him, since his personal safety and "his honour" depended on his discretion. In the course of the morning he sent a cordial message to Meta to say that he would drink afternoon tea with her at four o'clock.

END OF BOOK IV.

BOOK V

Rowland Proposes to Marry Meta

CHAPTER XXXV

IN WHICH ROWLAND PROPOSES TO MARRY META BEFORE THE REGISTRAR

As Rowland was crossing the vestibule of the Avondale on his way to Meta's apartments, Mrs Fenton waylaid him with the request for a few minutes' talk, as she had something important to say to him.

He hesitated and looked at his watch. It was a little past four o'clock, and he knew he was being waited for anxiously.

"I am rather in a hurry," said he. "Can't another time do?"

"Well, sir," returned Mrs Fenton, regarding him seriously, and assuming an air at once mysterious and profound, "the matter concerns you and may turn out to be important."

Suppressing an oath he followed her into her office.

"I am grieved to say, sir," she commenced, after she had carefully shut the door, and speaking as though assailed with sudden depression, "that your visits to the young lady have been commented upon, and that I have been imprudent enough to give myself away on your account."

"The deuce you have!" exclaimed the astonished Rowland, wondering if she was out of her mind. "And how have you given yourself away on my account, pray? I considered you a wise woman, Mrs Fenton, and a model of discretion."

A Woman at Bay

“People are sometimes apt to make mistakes, sir,” returned the good lady, lugubriously. “It has not been my intention to gossip of things that don’t concern me, but I was taken unawares by a gentleman who styled himself a friend of Colonel Benson’s and declared that he was also an intimate friend of yours.” She paused, but as Rowland showed no inclination for remark, having now got complete command of himself, she proceeded with her story, with many self-excuses, and protestations that she was innocent of doing him or the dear young lady any harm. “You see, sir, how it all happened, so sudden and unexpected, that I felt it only right to speak the truth at all hazards. It was the same day of your driving up here in your phaeton, and I was staring out of the window admiring the fine horses prancing and curvetting outside. I saw a tall, grand-looking gentleman pass the door of the hotel and then stop to look at the beautiful creatures; then he glanced up at the window, and I saw him start, as though he were very much astonished; a few minutes afterwards you came down seeming moody and disturbed-like, and without looking round you mounted the seat and drove away at a break-neck pace. I had lost sight of my fine gentleman whilst I was interested watching you, and wondering whether you would ever get home safe at the rate you were going, when a waiter came and told me that a gentleman wished to speak to the manageress; without hesitation I went out into the hall to see who it was, and there was the very same gentleman, smiling and courteous and pleasant-looking as could be. I told him to step into the office, for I seemed to think that a private interview was what he wanted. ‘This is a fine hotel,’ said he, cheerfully, ‘and I see you have some grand swells stopping here. I seemed to know the nob who went away in that phaeton.’ ‘That was Mr Hamilton,’ said I, ‘he is not residing here; it is his young lady whom he comes to see.’ Upon which my fine visitor gives a long, low whistle, and winked rather

Rowland Proposes to Marry Meta

rudely at me ; to maintain the honour of the establishment, I was obliged straightway to undeceive him, and tell him that Miss Benson was an old client of mine, and as thorough a lady as ever stepped in kid shoes, that you were her affianced husband, and shortly intended to marry her. 'Benson,' he repeated. 'Why, of course it must be the very same. I know Colonel Benson very well, he is in the same club as myself ; and this Mr Hamilton has often dined there with the Colonel. That was how I came to know his face so well. Well, my dear lady, I am glad that you have explained the situation to me, for I quite intended to engage rooms for my wife and family in this hotel, and I certainly would not think of doing so if I thought that the hotel was not respectable and properly managed. Your mentioning such well-known names as Hamilton and Benson are sufficient references. Now show me what rooms you have vacant, for we want to come in to-morrow.' That was yesterday he meant. I showed him the rooms and went over every necessary item with him, and he almost gave me his word that he would not fail to appear with his wife and family early in the afternoon ; he has never turned up, however, and I have begun to think that he was a take-in and got information out of me for some other purpose. Could he have been a detective, sir ?" She broke off, feeling guilty and uncomfortable, for Rowland's haggard, fever-laden eyes were fixed on her with anything but a favourable expression. In his own mind he was not quite sure whether she had not invented the story in order to pump him. He was naturally suspicious, and his intelligence was rendered all the more acute by the necessity for caution. Then, on the other hand, if her story was true, it was quite evident that he was being watched, possibly by a detective engaged in his wife's defence ; and the revelations of his frequent visits to Meta, and Mrs Fenton's asservation that she was his affianced bride, would go against him in the pending divorce. No judge or jury would grant him a *decree*

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nisi knowing him to be acting the dishonourable part of seducer to a young woman in Meta's position. Inwardly he cursed Mrs Fenton, but outwardly he controlled his vexation by passing the incident off as a joke.

"A detective?" he repeated, laughing unmusically. "And what on earth should either of us have occasion for detectives dodging our movements? No, my good lady, this fine gentleman of yours no doubt has changed his mind about bringing his wife and family here, and has gone elsewhere to roost. Meanwhile, I should ask you as a favour to be more discreet in your conversation regarding Miss Benson and myself. There is no need to give us away to every fine fellow who may call here on business. I must go now. By-the-bye, I do not know whether the young lady has intimated her intention of leaving London to-morrow. But such is her plan. She finds the heat in town too much for her, and will rejoin her father shortly at the seaside."

This was a facer, and Rowland did not wait to see the surprise, and disappointment in the woman's countenance, but turned away quickly to rejoin Meta in the upper regions.

Tea had already been brought in; the hotel drawing-room looked cosy and smelt sweet with the quantity of flowers he had sent in that morning; all of which had been tastefully arranged by the expectant girl, who advanced joyfully to meet him.

"You truant!" she said playfully. "Why did you fail me yesterday? I spent a miserable evening in consequence and could not sleep all night worrying about you and things in general. Now give an account of yourself, for I am jealous of every hour that you spend away from me."

"My darling, give me some tea first," was his reply, "and then we shall begin the first chapter of our romance together."

"Oh, I think you put an abrupt end to the first chapter the other day when you left me looking so black

Rowland Proposes to Marry Meta

in the face and so unhappy." She seated herself before the tea-table and the steaming kettle, a gay, innocent picture in her cool white dress; he stationed himself in an easy-chair near her, where he could admire, talk to and touch her without trouble.

"Your sleepless night seems to have agreed with you," said he, tenderly. "I never saw you look so charming."

"Now, Jack, don't flatter. My glass tells me a different story. I look and feel ten years older." She handed him a fragrant cup of tea, and then laughingly helped him to plum-cake. "I am so glad you don't despise afternoon tea like most men. I think it is the most delightful break in the day when four o'clock strikes and the rattle of cups and saucers suggest something sociable as well as gossipy."

"Ah, talking of gossip, it seems to me Mrs Fenton is inclined that way without the suggestive rattle of cups and saucers. Her tittle-tattle begins in the morning and is of a rather dangerous and obtrusive specimen."

He then related to Meta the conversation that had passed between him and the manageress.

Meta was exceedingly annoyed. "I wonder at her want of sense," said she. "But who could this inquisitive fellow be, Jack? If he is in the same club as my father he must be a military man."

Rowland shook his head disgustedly. "I have told her that you have made arrangements to leave the hotel to-morrow; that you intend to rejoin your father in the country as you find the heat in town unbearable."

"Oh, Jack, you are certainly romancing at my expense! How can you possibly tell her that without consulting me first? Not that I wish to remain here, I am sure, a day longer than necessary."

"Just so," returned he complacently. "I have rightly anticipated your wishes, and have made every arrangement for your leaving the Avondale to-morrow at noon."

"And where am I to go to?" she asked, somewhat

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startled and suspicious at the quiet dogmatism of his manner. That grand air of possession of his annoyed her, and she was on her guard by instinct.

"To-morrow—" said Rowland, and paused impressively; he rose from his seat, paced the room once, as though screwing up his courage for the declaration he was about to make, then, coming up to where she was, he took her hand, and in a voice trembling with emotion said, "To-morrow at two o'clock I have arranged to marry you before the Registrar. This time to-morrow we shall be travelling as husband and wife to Worthley Hall, near Worcester; I have made every arrangement to ensure your comfort and happiness." The last sentence was scarcely audible, he was white to the lips; had he been announcing the arrangements for a funeral he could not have appeared less gay, less inclined to smile and rejoice.

On Meta the announcement had a strange effect. Whatever the anticipation had been of becoming his bride, the reality certainly was not productive of pleasure. The very sense of realising such a project so soon and so suddenly caused her to feel cold and miserable. She did not blush, nor did she smile and evince by any facial expression that she was pleased with the news. There was something fearful and uncomfortable in the thought that so important a crisis in her life should come on her unprepared and in a way unwelcomed. She was pale as he was, all the joyous gaiety wiped off her countenance as if by an evil spell, and her heart too was heavy within her.

"Are you not pleased?" he at last found voice to say. "I have only consulted your wishes. You expressed a desire for an immediate union, and under the present circumstances it cannot be too immediate, since your position will entirely be altered when you are my wife." A sickly smile played on his lips; the words came out mockingly and tamely; he felt like the veriest devil tempting her with his lies and deceit.

"Oh, Rowland!" cried the deluded girl, stifling a

Rowland Proposes to Marry Meta

miserable sensation, and endeavouring to feel pleased in spite of herself, "it is all so sudden ! I did not know one could get married quite so quickly ; and then I have no bridesmaids, no one to give me away, no bridal cake—nothing at all."

"Only your bridegroom to love you and adore you all your life long," he added, fondly drawing her to him. "Is not that enough ? What more can woman want ? A quiet wedding is ever so much more impressive, and you will be none the less my wife because you will not be made a show-figure for curious eyes to gaze on."

"But, Rowland, I should ever so much prefer being married in a church than before a Registrar."

She looked very much inclined to cry ; he saw it, and in his fondest and most passionate manner strove to reassure her. He told her that his father's precarious state of health and the confusion their estates were in demanded privacy ; that any day or hour he might hear of the old Viscount's death ; that the shock of any unexpected news might hasten his end, so that he would delay introducing his bride until the old man had got stronger, and then he was quite sure that everything would turn out right in the end : and if Meta wished it she should have the ceremony repeated in the private chapel of Castle Rowland and in the presence of the Viscount. All this seemed very satisfactory. Meta gradually entered into his plans, asking him many questions of their Worthley home, and hearing everything he had to say regarding the directions that Hunt was carrying out in his master's name. As Rowland's future Viscountess she felt already consoled for the quiet marriage before the Registrar.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

META'S DREAM

"I OUGHT to have a proper trousseau, Jack," said Meta, when they had dined together for the last time at the Avondale and had returned to the drawing-room to discuss further plans. "I think before Mrs Hunt leaves to-morrow, I will give her a list of all the things I require, and they can be sent on to Worthley. You have seen all my dresses; I have absolutely nothing new." The near prospect of becoming his wife reconciled her to the necessity of receiving useful wearing apparel from him.

"Order anything you like," returned Rowland, as he lit a cigar and settled himself comfortably on a settee. "Only see that the order is given in my name of Hamilton."

"I wonder what the Balfours will think of my marriage with you?" observed Meta, flitting about the room restlessly.

"They will not be surprised; they expected it sooner or later," he answered carelessly.

"I should so like to have had a pretty wedding with dear little Winifred for my chief bridesmaid."

"She would have pushed herself forward and got married to me instead. You wouldn't have had a chance!"

Meta joined in the laugh abstractedly; her mood became suddenly thoughtful, almost sad.

"I dreamt of them all last night, Jack. Of the Balfours, Falkners, and that funny Colonel Pauncefote and his wife, who warned Mrs Balfour against having a handsome governess in the house. Mrs Balfour told me

Meta's Dream

about it afterwards and expressed a very poor opinion of Mrs Pauncefote's general idea of things."

"What was your dream about?" he asked, lazily puffing away at his cigar and watching her very restless movements about the room.

"I don't think I ought to tell you," she laughed nervously. "It was not at all a complimentary dream about you. It was so strange and so realistic."

"I love realistic dreams; they are quite out of the common. It was not a case of 'I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls,' was it? For if so, I shall have reason to be tremendously jealous of the vassals and serfs at your side."

"You are sure you will not mind, Jack?"

"Dreams go contrary," said he, good-humouredly.

"I am not likely to mind—just the reverse, perhaps."

"Will you try and interpret it for me, Jack? There is a meaning in it."

"Fire away," said Rowland, giving a caressing pull to her ear as she seated herself on a low stool at his feet.

Meta slightly pouted; the command seemed to throw a ludicrous bearing on what she considered a very serious subject. She had been meaning to relate it to him, and here seemed a delightful opportunity if only he would listen to it sympathetically.

"Well," she began, "it was a dream and nothing but a dream, though it made me feel very depressed afterwards, when I awoke from it and wondered what it could possibly mean. I fancied in my sleep that I had been already married to you and that we were walking hand-in-hand in a very beautiful old-fashioned garden; you were telling me of some great danger you were in, and how you had escaped losing your life by your love for me, and so on. What the conversation was exactly I could not remember, but that it concerned you and some peril you were in was all that I could gather. Then suddenly you disappeared from my side, and looking round, I saw Mr Falkner and his mother on a little terrace raised above

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the path where I was standing. They were beckoning to me; Mrs Falkner was pointing in my direction and bidding her son, as it were, go to me. There was something very strange and unearthly about her; she looked more like a ghost than a living person. It seemed to me as though she were dead, and that it was her spirit standing there pleading with him to come to my help. Then all at once I became aware of some grief which was troubling me, some great sorrow and disgrace hanging over my head, and I became paralysed with fear, and I called out to them to comfort me. I saw Mrs Falkner give her son a gentle push as if to hurry him to come to me, and then she suddenly disappeared and I found myself alone with Mr Falkner."

"A very foolish dream," interrupted Rowland with a very high colour. "Well, what had the parson to say to you?"

"I began telling him the trouble I was in," said Meta, softly, not heeding the vexation in his tone, "and asked him what I should do to get out of it. I went on speaking very rapidly, sometimes blaming you, sometimes blaming myself. He listened very gravely to all I had to say, then with a calm, set look on his face he looked up, and in a deep, warning voice uttered these words: 'Fly from sin, from temptation, from ruin; the man deceives you; he is false, trust him not; he will murder you soul and body.' Then he too left me and I seemed turned to stone at his words. But," continued Meta, so deeply interested in the remembrance of her dream that she had no eyes for Rowland, whose face plainly betrayed the passion he was in, "but barely had he gone I saw coming towards me a tall, fair woman with red-gold hair. She stopped and looked at me in a very scornful manner, as if I was some creature very much her inferior, and I heard her say:—'If you are wise you will heed what that good man tells you.' And then, Rowland, I seemed to see everybody I had met at The Homestead—the Balfours, with Winifred, Colonel and

Meta's Dream

Mrs Pauncefote, the Falkners, and, conspicuous amongst them all, that odious woman, Mrs Bankes, her face redder and uglier than ever. She pointed to me very scornfully; in my shame and distress I rushed to Mrs Falkner, or rather her ghost (for I seemed in my dream to be sensible that she was dead and it was only her spirit I saw); I begged her to take pity on me. 'Let me go with you,' I cried repeatedly. 'I am in such trouble; I want to die and be in peace.' Then everybody present seemed to be speaking at once and at me. I felt as though I would die of shame, when suddenly Mr Falkner came up to me; he lifted me from the ground, whither I had thrown myself in my distress, and carried me as he would a little child, away, away from all that hubbub and confusion. And then I woke up and found that it was only a dream."

"A very foolish, unaccountable one too, and the sooner forgotten the better," said Rowland, bitterly.

"Oh, Jack," said Meta, bursting into tears, "it is not true, is it? You are not deceiving me in anything, are you?"

"Do I look like a man who would deceive you?" he rejoined evasively. "Have I not proved true to you in a thousand ways? Dreams go contrary, you know," he added with forced gaiety. "So all the evil you have been unjustly dreaming about me only means all the good things you are to enjoy as my wife."

"Jack," said she, in a low, frightened voice, "who was that woman with the red-gold hair? Was that your dead wife, Jack?"

"Did I not bid you never to speak of her?" he burst out angrily. "Had you dreamt as things really happened, it is I who should be warning you and all the world against her. She has been the ruin of my life. If you care for me, Meta, you will neither speak of her to me or to anyone else."

"How unfortunate that you ever married her!" Meta remarked. "Has she been dead long, Jack?"

A Woman at Bay

"There you go again in open disregard of my wishes. She has been dead long enough to enable me to make myself happy with you. Let us drop the subject, Meta; it is a painful one to me. You have not yet asked me about our new home that is to be," he added, anxious to change the subject. "Do you remember telling me you would like a boudoir furnished exactly like my mother's? Well, it is done. I had the designer from Melier's expressly down to see the room, so as to make a faithful copy of it. I think we shall both enjoy being in our country home. You will be in fairyland at Worthley. How I long for to-morrow, Meta!"

She blushed and cast a shy look at him. "Jack," she whispered, as if inspired with a sudden fear, "will you swear to be always good to me? Always tender and true as you are now? I am sometimes afraid that I am not doing right in marrying you thus secretly. Oh, Jack, it would kill me! I think it would madden me were I to find out afterwards that I had done wrong, and that after all you were not quite true to me."

She spoke in a low, passionate voice that startled Rowland, for it plainly revealed the depth of emotion of which she was capable when roused. He felt that he was dealing with a proud, high-spirited woman, capable of dangerous possibilities should she ever discover the injury done her. Whatever remnant of conscience he then possessed bade him think seriously before the fatal step was taken. But unhappily the poor remnant was far too small, too weak to influence him. His only reply to her was to take her in his arms and breathe again his vows of fidelity, devotion and tenderness.

For Better and For Worse

CHAPTER XXXVII

FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE

ROWLAND had desired her to be dressed very quietly for the important ceremony, and amongst all the finery she saw packed away, she felt loath to look upon a light grey cashmere which was to be her wedding-dress. It seemed such a dull, shabby sort of garment to be married in, she thought, as she watched Mrs Hunt's busy movements about the room, herself still in bed with a dainty breakfast-tray placed before her. Her attendant, of course, was to know nothing about the affair. Meta had given her a long list of all the purchases to be made in Regent Street before leaving town, and by nine in the morning Mrs Hunt was out to order the *recherche* outfit, promising to be back again by eleven o'clock.

Meta did not feel gay and festive; her thoughts, when they did not dwell on dress, wandered to Robert Falkner with strange persistency. There were tears even in her eyes as she thought of him. She wondered what he would think of her approaching marriage with Rowland before a Registrar! Mrs Hunt's return from the shopping expedition put an end to her meditations. All then was bustle and hurry. By mid-day they were driving to Paddington. Meta saw Mrs Hunt off by the 12.40 train to Worthley. Then engaging a cab she drove off to meet Rowland at Euston. She was a little early for the appointment, so after paying the cabman she resolved to sit quietly in the ladies' waiting-room and await his coming, when, on crossing the great square, she was accosted by a strange gentleman, who marched up to her, hat in hand, as if to speak to her. She turned

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scornfully away from the gallant, then heard a voice close in her ear say,—

“Don’t you know me, Meta? I am Jack.”

Great God! was this indeed Rowland! with those ill-fitting clothes on, that well-worn bowler on his head, a moustache that was wonderful for its size and ginger colour, and an imperial that made him look like some French *roué* out on the spree! She stared at him for a whole minute without speaking, her disgust showing itself plainly on her countenance.

“Don’t seem surprised,” he whispered. “I ought to have told you I meant to put this toggery on. We can’t be too careful.” Then he asked her if it was all well with her. “Has Mrs Hunt gone?”

Meta recovered herself sufficiently to give him an account of how things had progressed, and asked where they were going next. She evidently felt ashamed of being seen in his company, and was anxious to hurry away from the many curious eyes that were cast on them.

“Come along then,” said Rowland, brusquely; “we will get out of this.”

The “getting out of this” meant the getting into a cab waiting outside the departure platform, and they drove away at a brisk rate from the station.

“Where are we driving to, Jack?” she asked, after she had favoured him with a long stare and felt ready to cry from vexation at the sight of his general appearance, which was certainly anything but aristocratic.

“To North London,” he responded evasively.

“You look like a commercial traveller out of work,” she remarked disgustedly.

He laughed unmirthfully. “What does it matter how I look? The chief thing is not to attract attention. I no more like being married before a registrar than you do: and I have no wish to be recognised by him again. I am glad you were sensible about the dress and veil; you can take the latter off when we are in our saloon carriage on the journey to Worthley.”

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"Have you engaged a saloon carriage then?" she exclaimed, somewhat mollified at the idea of anything so comfortable and exclusive.

He did not reply, but seemed plunged in thought; and she could not help noticing the gloomy expression that overspread his features as, with face half averted from her, he stared out of the window into the street.

"Have you any other Christian name beside that of Meta?" he asked suddenly.

"I was christened Meta," she replied wonderingly. "It was my mother's wish: *her* name was Margaret. I have no other Christian name."

"That is awkward," pronounced Rowland, wishing, no doubt, he had had a hand in her christening that he might have favoured her with another name more suitable for his purpose. "Very awkward," he repeated meditatively. "It would be more convenient if you had another name, *then* that of Meta could be dropped. But suppose you assume that of Margaret in the signature? Margaret Bennett? Should any unpleasantness occur afterwards, and people were to remark on the future Vicountess Rowland's maiden name, they would not dream of confusing it with that of Margaret Bennett in the Registrar's book."

"Won't it affect the validity of the marriage? I thought one was always obliged to marry in one's own name?"

"What does it matter," said he, irritably, "since we are going to be married again in a month's time? You know that I told you it should be so!" And then he commenced directing her as to the ceremonial that was to take place shortly, and what would be expected of her. "It is just like being married in church," he explained. "The only difference is that it is essentially a state marriage; there will be no unnecessary prayers, no kneeling down and getting up again, a thing which I so abominate; for it doesn't make one's union a bit more binding, all that nonsense and parade."

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"The Church solemnisation is certainly much nicer, and infinitely more respectable," interpolated Meta, emphatically. "There must be something very low in being married before a registrar, or else why did you take such pains to disguise yourself?"

"Well," said he, annoyed, "I have told you my reasons, and I can't do more."

"Don't be cross, Jack. I am sorry if I vex you ; but this is such a grim mockery to my dreams of wedding finery, bridal robes and all the rest of grand rejoicings that ought to accompany a girl's wedding."

"And you girls think nothing of the bridegroom, or the discomfort and misery he has to suffer from all that show and nonsense !" The speech was half playful in its enforced cheerfulness : it was intended, also, to soothe down her natural disappointment and the disillusion he saw weighing on her spirit.

The rest of the seeming long drive was passed in pleasanter talk. He endeavoured his best to amuse and distract her attention from herself and showed himself at his best.

At the end of an hour the cab stopped in front of a building which looked like a refreshment bar. The door of it was open : there were very few people about. Rowland said something in a low voice to an elderly woman, who came forward to receive them. It was a liberal order for luncheon, and then he and his companion hurried through the shop into an arched passage opening into a courtyard with a large stone building a little way down the other side. A rusty iron gate admitted them into the paved entrance of the house. As they ascended the narrow stone steps, Meta saw a brass plate on the door, which told all inquiring minds that this was the register office of births, deaths and marriages.

Rowland rang the bell, and without waiting for reply turned the handle of the door and entered.

"I am expected, I think," said he in a gruff voice to the young clerk behind the writing-desk.

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The youth nodded intelligently and hastily, showed them into an inner office, which was certainly more comfortable than the tiny compartment he occupied near the door.

"The Registrar will be down in a minute," said he, as he stared somewhat rudely at Meta.

The room they found themselves in was large, and furnished not unlike a newspaper office. There were a few pictures of Royalty on the wall, and a splendid engraving of the Prince of Wales's wedding over the mantelpiece. A desk with a huge book on it stood in the centre of the room. Meta sat down on one of the two chairs placed in front of this piece of furniture and eyed the volume curiously. Soon, she thought, it would contain their names as man and wife. Rowland had reminded her of her new appellation when the cab had stopped at the door, and she was now repeating it to herself as though it were a lesson—Margaret Bennett. She was conning it over to her increasing wonderment at the idea of being married under a false name, when a tall, portly man entered and put an abrupt end to her musing.

He was dressed in a pepper-coloured suit of clothes, instead of the respectable black which constituted her idea of strict propriety in an individual who was about to perform so important a ceremony as that of uniting two persons in legal, if not in holy, matrimony. His broad, fat face was framed with luxuriant red whiskers; his hair (whatever there was of it) was of the same warm tint, and his thick lips wore a smiling expression as he bade the happy pair "Good morning."

"Good morning," returned Rowland, brusquely, although it was long past the meridian; but he was in too great a flurry to consider the correctness of the salutation in his nervous and almost feverish anxiety to get the business over. "I am afraid we are a little late in keeping our appointment, but we will begin immediately so as to lose no time." He signed to Meta to rise from

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her seat, and they stood together before the desk, at which the Registrar had already planted himself, with the imposing record of his profession open before him.

The young clerk's entrance as witness caused a slight disturbance. He first stationed himself by the Registrar, whence he again honoured embarrassed Meta with one of his long and inquisitive stares, then he moved to Rowland's side, where he took upon himself the office of "best man" by nudging his elbow and asking him if he had forgotten the ring.

Rowland meekly produced it from his waistcoat pocket and placed it on the register book. "We are quite ready," he said.

The ceremony of a state marriage then commenced with the usual formula.

"I, John, take thee, Margaret, to my wedded wife," pronounced the criminal in a trembling voice. "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow."

Wretch! had he said instead, "With this ring I thee deceive, with my body I will ruin thee, and with all my worldly goods I will tempt thee to thy destruction," he would indeed have uttered words of truth and not of falsehood!

And the poor, deluded girl, as she responded inaudibly to this declaration, little thought that she was innocently helping him to commit an unpardonable crime against Society and the State! The putting on of the ring and the signing of the register completed the nuptials—if nuptials it can be called.

"Now that this pleasant ordeal is over, Mr Registrar," said Rowland, cheerfully, "we will be off. By the way, here is a trifle to take yourself and wife and family to the seaside." With princely liberality he handed over a fifty-pound bank note to the astonished and delighted official.

The youthful clerk, sole witness to this festive wedding, was also generously rewarded for his trouble;

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and with the combined good wishes of both, Meta and her false lover departed. They crossed the paved court again and soon found themselves inside the bar.

The elderly woman accosted them.

"Your lunch is quite ready, sir," said she.

"We have no time to partake of it," replied Rowland, hastily. "But here is something that will repay you for the expense you have been put to." And he thrust a sovereign into the woman's hand; then, without waiting to receive her thanks, he re-entered the cab with Meta. The order was given to drive back to the city.

"Why did you order lunch there when you did not intend to take it?" asked Meta as they were driving off.

"It was only a ruse to put the woman and the cabman off the scent. They neither of them suspect that we have been to the register office."

"How very strange!" exclaimed Meta, innocently.

"What is strange?" returned Rowland. "That you are now my wife?" And he pressed her hand.

"Am I really married to you, Jack? Is that farce of a ceremony absolutely legal in the eyes of the law? Somehow I don't feel as if I were bound to you the least little bit more now than before it."

She peered earnestly into his face for a reply. She certainly did not feel like a happy bride; her prevailing sensation was that of extreme nervousness and depression.

Rowland hesitated before giving her an answer; then with an effort he said, "You are as much bound to me as any married wife can be to her husband. You have your ring and that farce of a ceremony, as you call it, to go by. And then you have my love and life-long devotion. Are not these enough?"

On their arrival at St Pancras, Rowland bade her go into the waiting-room, promising to return in a few minutes. When she saw him again, she would have recognised him anywhere; he had thrown off his disguise, and appeared in his usual irreproachable attire.

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They immediately engaged a hansom, and drove off to Euston in time for the 2.30 train to Worthley.

They travelled in the luxurious saloon carriage Rowland had bespoken, and where a substantial luncheon was served to Meta's great satisfaction, for she was faint as well as exhausted with the fatigues and excitements she had undergone that eventful morning.

"Oh, Rowland," she cried in delight as the train was steaming away at express speed, "this feels something like going on one's honeymoon! How glad I am after all that I married you!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MR AND MRS HAMILTON

It was a satisfaction to Rowland that his wealth at least secured him the implicit obedience of his servants, for on arriving at Worthley he and Meta found every possible comfort and luxury awaiting them in the old-fashioned Hall.

The new domestics seemed as though they had already undergone a course of training. They received Mr and Mrs Hamilton with the greatest respect.

Whether Hunt himself had a suspicion of the real state of affairs, it was impossible to say. He sincerely believed that Meta, whom he had every reason to respect, had been duped into a mock marriage, for on no conditions, he surmised, would she have submitted to an illicit connection. As it was no business of his to inquire into the matter, he fulfilled his master's commands to the very letter. His wife also acted conjointly with him, and lent herself in various ways to deceiving her young mistress.

Mr and Mrs Hamilton

Worthley was a fairyland of delight to Meta, and she revelled in it like one in a delicious dream.

She was, needless to say, for the first week or so, intensely happy and intensely gratified with her position. There seemed nothing wanting in Rowland's mad devotion for her. Life seemed full of the most entrancing happiness. She often wondered if the brightness was merely ephemeral, an outcome of the novelty of a bride's existence; the first few days were passed as in a dream, and then clouds came to darken the blue of her heaven: then she commenced to realise the very earthly existence she had entered into by the close contact with the coarse, sensual nature of the man she believed to be her husband.

Her perceptions became gradually awakened to his habits, which were not abstemious, and were certainly intemperate. She saw with secret disgust that he drank more than was good for him, and drank hard. He seemed always in a state of excitement, of anticipation, and his restless change of moods puzzled her. About ten days after their arrival at Worthley he had received a notification from the lawyers that the court would be ready to sit *in camera* the following day, and that his attendance would be required. He had sent an excuse back, but despatched Hunt to the scene of action to repeat his affidavit. Then Messrs Goreham favoured their client with a letter marked "private," in which they expressed their doubts of final success, as the solicitor acting for the co-respondent had possessed himself of certain secrets touching the present private life of the plaintiff: also that Sir Edward Manby fully intended to divulge these secrets in court and advise the defendant to sue for judicial separation and alimony. They hoped that such an accusation was false, and they begged Rowland to be present at the sitting, so as to be ready to contradict any such allegation—otherwise they could not hold themselves responsible for any untoward miscarriage of justice.

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This private letter drove Rowland to the very edge of insanity, and made him drink all the harder to drown the terrible fears with which he was assailed.

Certainly no one observing him as he walked by Meta's side in the garden that lovely summer evening in the month of July would take him for a happy bridegroom! His restless manner, and the worried, hunted look on his face, were more suggestive of a criminal who lives in constant fear of being found out, so seldom it is that the evil we commit brings us the happiness we anticipated from satiety. Like Dead Sea fruit the taste of his sin had seemed as bitter ashes in the tasting. He had so much to fear from the consequences of his evil-doing, and his guilty conscience made a hell of the heaven he imagined he had built for himself in his false marriage with Meta.

"I am afraid," she was anxiously saying, as she glanced at his flushed, perturbed countenance, "Worthley does not agree with you. You are looking very ill."

"It agrees with me well enough," was the irritable reply. "It is my confounded nerves that are out of gear. I feel sometimes as if I can't drink enough brandy to quiet them."

"I don't think brandy is good for the nerves," said Meta, gravely. "You are always ordering a B.-and-S. It must be very prejudicial to your health to indulge that constant craving for drink."

"Pray don't take to lecturing already," said Rowland. "These are rather early days to begin."

"I am not lecturing, Jack dear," she returned soothingly, "I am only anxious about you. You seem to enjoy so little sleep at night, and you mutter so to yourself when you are alone, that it is quite painful for me to see it all and not make some effort to give you relief. Last night you must have had some horrible dream, for you woke me up with your groans; and when I touched your face to wake you, why, to my

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horror, it was bathed in cold perspiration, and you looked ghastly."

"Never mind how I looked," returned Rowland, heartily wishing she would not observe him so closely. "I tell you it is my nerves and nothing else that is playing the mischief with me."

"Get medical advice," persisted Meta, gently, "or you will be ill, Rowland, and then—"

"There you go again," he interrupted sharply. "I have told you a hundred times to drop that name whilst we are here, but I may as well warn a new-born baby as you. You are so indiscreet!"

Meta flushed and look frightened: it was the first time he had ever addressed her thus, though his perpetual restrictions on her to be careful, etc., were galling to her proud and open nature.

"Oh, Jack," she cried in self-defence, "why are you so cross and difficult to-day? There cannot be very much harm done even, if I was overheard, for we are married man and wife, and in another week or two you said you would take me to Castle Rowland and present me as your bride to your father. You will keep your promise, will you not? I am beginning to get rather tired of all this secret-keeping. There seems something very wrong about it; the servants too will soon begin to suspect. I fancy Mrs Hunt rather doubts that I am legally married to you. She seems strangely familiar in her manner at times, and is inclined to be gossipy."

"You must be on your guard then. On no account ever hint even about the ceremony at the Registrar's. Let them suspect or think what they like; as long as you are yourself certain that it is all right, what does it matter?"

Rowland spoke in a low, cautious voice, and glanced around nervously as though fearing to be overheard. He had repeatedly attributed this caution to the fact that his sick father was ignorant of the marriage and that any sudden unforeseen revelation of it to him now in his

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invalid condition might be fatal. Perhaps the daily expectation of his death, and the prospect before her of being a Viscountess, did much to blind poor Meta as to the real state of affairs. Had she been suspicious she would have pried more into the meshes of deceit by which she was ensnared, and would have gleaned sufficient insight then to know that it was not all right with her or with Rowland either. But life under the present circumstances offered far too many allurements to allow her to be troubled long with her lover's unaccountable moods and vagaries. Suspicion was an ugly, unwelcome guest where all was pleasant and gracious to the eye and senses. Here in this lovely old-world garden, where Nature and art reigned supreme, she was undisputed mistress of all she surveyed.

The paths through which they were strolling were bordered with the most beautiful flower-beds; great copses of trees jutted here and there, and threw their heavy shadow on many a well-kept, undulating lawn. Wherever she gazed she saw some scene to delight her; the luxuriant verdure of tree, lawn and wood, the heavy delicious perfume of rare flowers, and the endless view beyond of hills and valleys, and above all the cool, balmy air which she breathed with the vivid enjoyment of youth, made her feel how sweet life was, and sent thrilling pulses of delight through every nerve in her body.

How different her sensations to those of Rowland as he sauntered beside her, his thoughts clouded over with fear and anxiety, and his mind a perpetual chaos as to the state he should be in if the divorce did not end in his favour! All the future happiness of his life depended on it, for on it he had staked more than his life's happiness; his personal safety and his honour were thrown in the balance, and if the balance were found wanting it would go hardly with him. He dared not imagine to himself how Meta would receive the inevitable, as inevitable it must be, for she must know

The Sleeper Awakened

sooner or later. He feared and dreaded the telling her, and had already spent many an hour in conning over the difficulty and suggesting to himself a hundred different ways by which he might escape from the ordeal.

"What have you sent Hunt to London for, Jack?" asked Meta, presently, as she stooped to pick a rose.

"How do you know that I have sent him to London?" returned Rowland evasively.

"Oh, everyone goes to London if they go anywhere at all," she answered carelessly. "Has he gone about this monetary trouble of yours at the bank?"

"He has gone up to town on business; he will be back in a few days."

He was glad that she should imagine that he had troubles of a monetary nature such as would worry him and obscure his perfect enjoyment of her society. With this idea to back him when the inevitable hour came, who knew but he might still succeed in deceiving her as time went on.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE SLEEPER AWAKENED

THE third hearing of the Rowland *versus* Rowland and Dale divorce suit settled the matrimonial quarrel and brought the affair to a close. The attendant judge had heard with severe disapprobation the whole course of plaintiff's conduct, his numerous infidelities and his harsh treatment of the injured wife. Sir Edward Manby's eloquence carried all before him; he gave it as his opinion, and the opinion of every honourable Englishmen, that if anyone needed redress or sympathy it

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was his client, who, through an unfortunate marriage, was bound for life to a worthless debauchee. The whole affair, he declared, was a trumped-up one, brought forward on the plea that the plaintiff's desire for a divorce was because he wished to marry another woman, and this other was a young lady of good birth, the daughter of an officer in the 10th Hussars. "If you will take the trouble, my lord," he ended, "to go to a certain place called Worthley Hall you will find the distinguished plaintiff—"

Rowland's counsel here interrupted with an appeal to his Lordship that they had not met for the purpose of blackening his client's character.

"No, no, of course not," said the judge, mildly. But he allowed the K.C., however, to continue with the fact that plaintiff had fixed on this young lady as the second Mrs Rowland, and that even then, as he was speaking, they were both living in this secluded country place as man and wife. The information caused a sensation in court such as was seldom witnessed by judge and jury, let alone a few grey-headed virtuous wisacres who had been picked out to settle the case between them.

There was no hope for Rowland from the very commencement of the hearing; it almost seemed to his solicitor that the judge was predisposed against him, and the case was condemned before it was heard.

Hunt left the court, his imperturbable countenance greatly elongated by the termination of affairs. It was in vain that he and one or two others in Rowland's employ had repeated their asseverations on oath against their master's wife; they were not believed, or what they affirmed was considered of no importance: they were not even allowed to finish their carefully-prepared affidavits; possibly their accent and composition did not please the fastidious judge, who dismissed them with a meaning smile, more suggestive of eloquence than patience.

The Sleeper Awakened

Hunt sympathised with his master, and cursed the terrible disappointment that the failure of his divorce would bring ; he suspected a great deal of the real facts of Rowland's position with Meta, and he wondered now how his generous employer would get out of the web of difficulty he had woven for himself.

He had received strict commands to return to Worthley as soon as his presence was no longer required as witness. Had he good news to carry he would have hurried on the wings of love to be the first to apprise Rowland of anything that might have given him pleasure to hear ; but the blank failure of the suit damped his ardour, and he dreaded the coming interview with his master with a dread born of the knowledge he possessed of the passionate and violent nature of the man he had to deal with. He knew that Rowland would not receive legal intimation from his lawyers until the following morning, since he had forbidden wires to be sent to his retreat at Worthley.

Hunt took upon himself the responsibility of delaying his departure for one day at least, in order to give his master time to recover from the first shock of disappointment.

The next day he took the early morning train to Worcester. He was met at Worthley Station by the new groom, who had driven down in the dog-cart to meet him. He apprehensively asked if there were any news. His imagination pictured Rowland in a tornado of passion and disappointment, cursing and swearing at all around him, and possibly committing acts of violence which he would have reason to be sorry for afterwards.

The groom shook his head at Hunt's question ; he was a middle-aged man with a long experience of bad-tempered masters, but his present employer certainly beat the record. There was an ominous frown on his face as he whipped up the horse to a faster trot.

"Can't say, I am sure, what you mean by news, Mr Hunt," was his reply. "There has been a row all

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round at the stables, and the coachman has given warning ; he won't put up with being insulted even by a play-lord."

"What do you mean?" cried Hunt, indignantly.

"What I say," returned the man, doggedly, and with a high colour ; "we are not pigs, but we are human beings with a mind to think and do our duty. You come and engage us on the minute, not waiting even to get our characters, as be as respectable as characters can be, and then bring us to this out-of-the-way hole with a young master and mistress who shut themselves up like a brace of love-birds and never see a soul from day to day ; and who seems, as from what I hear from the footmen in the house, to have a deal of things to conceal from their servants. And now this morning, after the post-bag was taken in, what does he do but flies into an infernal rage 'cause he no doubt has got unpleasant news from town ; he kicks the poor dogs all round until the blood streams from them, then he comes to the stables, rows us all up like the very devil, and then belabours the poor harmless 'orses one after the other until the animals are mad with pain. If he is mad the asylum is the proper place for him ; he won't get good, respectable, peace-loving servants to work for him. We have all given warning to one man : so I say it again, Mr Hunt, this day month you will have to go back to the registry office in Parson's Green and engage a new cart-load of domestics and grooms to come down to this dead-and-alive hole. We ain't going to be insulted and called 'lazy hounds' for nothing."

He whipped up the fast-trotting mare once more, and surveyed the flying landscape around him with infinite disdain of consequences.

Hunt had listened to his tirade at first with wonder at the man's insolence ; then all consideration for himself was forgotten in the disagreeable duty before him of facing Rowland when in one of his mad rages.

"How is the mistress ? and how is my wife ?" he

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presently asked, curious to know if any violence had extended to their discomfort also.

"Oh, Mrs Hunt is peppery enough," replied the groom. "She had a deal to put up with from the master this morning ; but as for the young mistress, I have heard as she has been in asterisks from fright at Mister Hamilton's violence. She was constantly asking when you were a-coming back."

The latter part of this speech made the confidential valet feel guilty that he had not hastened his return yesterday and prepared Rowland for the disastrous news of the morning. He could have prevented him from giving way to his excessive rage by tact and discrimination, but at the same time he would have had to suffer the extreme brunt of the battle ; and even now, as he thought of it, he sickened at the idea of meeting his master. But there was no help for it, the sooner the interview was over the better.

He asked to be put down at the entrance gate, and directed the groom to drive to the stables by the back way. A little respite for quiet meditation was very necessary under the circumstances.

There was not a soul to be seen in the long avenue that led to the mansion ; no dogs barked their welcome or expressed their canine suspicions of unexpected visitors : the whole place seemed shrouded in stillness and apparent solitude, until he reached the flower-garden, and there by herself, disconsolate and sad, and looking like a ghost of herself, stood Meta, in a white morning-dress, although it wanted but an hour or so to the bewitching tea-time. She had heard his footsteps on the gravel and issued from a large summer-house to see whom they belonged to.

Her pale, tearful face lighted up with relief as she recognised him.

"Oh, Hunt," she cried, "I am glad you have come ! Your master has been in such a state this morning. No one knows what it is that has upset him. Is it bad news

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from the old Viscount, do you think? He will not tell me what it is. But he has nearly lamed the dogs in his rage, and the horses too, your wife tells me, have been fearfully treated. All the servants have given notice; they are quite sure that he is mad, and are terribly afraid to go near him. Mrs Hunt has been giving him large quantities of brandy to quiet him, much against my will, but I thought it wiser to keep away from him, for I feel weak and nervous." Her voice shook with suppressed tears as she concluded, and she looked appealingly at Hunt, trying in vain to conceal her emotion from his curious but sympathetic gaze.

He half guessed the truth as he listened to her; her whole manner revealed it to him: that she was, or had reason to consider, herself the legal wife of the man she feared there was not the smallest doubt in his mind. She had been duped by a false marriage ceremony, he surmised rightly, and the revelation of her real position would be a shock to her not pleasant to imagine. How sorry he felt for her at that moment he could not say. But she, had she divined his heart-felt pity, she would have forgotten her distress in a storm of pride and anger that would fairly have annihilated him. He knew his place, however, too well to endanger it by the most trifling air of familiarity.

"I am sorry, madam," he replied respectfully, "that I did not return yesterday to warn my master of some bad news that reached him this morning. You have done wisely to keep away from him; it is the only thing to do until the fit is over. He will soon be all right now; it doesn't last long, that is a blessing."

"Is he accustomed to fits then?" asked Meta, more alarmed than she cared to show.

"Fits of rage and disappointment, madam, when things don't go smoothly with him. My poor master is very much worried at present, and the old Viscount's fast failing health is an added anxiety. I *shouldn't* be

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surprised if he has to go away in a day or two, so as to be with his father in the end."

"My poor husband!" said Meta, her heart bursting with sympathy for the misguided, erring sinner whom she had so cruelly misunderstood. "Go to him, Hunt, and see what you can do to comfort him. He has been much upset, let me tell you, at your not turning up yesterday. You know him better than any of us, so that I expect you will do wonders in the way of quieting him."

She dismissed him with an imperative gesture, and with a mind much relieved watched him enter the house by the open door.

CHAPTER XL

THE CALM THAT FOLLOWS THE STORM

HE was anxious to feel his ground, though the interview with Mrs Hamilton had greatly restored to him his normal courage and self-possession. So, instead of making his way to the library, where he knew he would find Rowland, he turned to the servants' offices. Here he heard loud voices—a regular hubbub of shrill treble and low bass intermixed—the sounds of which were not reassuring. In the pantry adjoining the massive stone kitchen he came in sight of a whole bevy of domestics, each one airing his or her complaint, and each one trying to out-talk the other.

There were the butler, the two footmen, the coachmen and the head groom, and on the other side of the passage, opening into the kitchen, was the stout cook, who with a red, angry face was holding forth to Mrs Hunt and the other female domestics on the unpardonable insult she had received that morning in regard to some dish.

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"I have never in all my born life," Hunt heard her say, "gone through such a day as this. I have lived in gentlemen's houses, I have, and cooked for them too, and have never had an omelette sent down with such a remark as it wasn't fit for a dog to eat ! Do you think I shall stop after that ? Not I ! Not if my place was worth twice its value. So I give you fair warning, Mrs Hunt, I leave this day month."

"And so do I," echoed the housemaid and chambermaid simultaneously. "We are afraid of the master, we are, and we ain't accustomed to be stormed at as if we were dogs."

"I wouldn't serve any man, even if he was the Prince of Whales himself, who would wantonly ill-treat vallable horses and dogs for nothing," pronounced the elderly coachman, joining the female group as he spoke, and bringing with him the other flunkys.

"Nor I !" said the head groom, fervently. "I think it is a dead shame to be abused for doing your duty to them dumb animals."

Hunt came forward from behind the door, where he had been standing listening to the above discourse, and confronted them, to their utmost astonishment.

"What is all this about ?" he demanded in his usual quiet, imperturbable manner.

They all spoke at once and the hubbub was overwhelming. Mrs Hunt was the only one who did not speak, but preserved a quiescent demeanour through it all. Perhaps her union with Hunt had something to do with this tranquil self-possession ; she regarded her husband as an incarnation of wisdom, and always took her rôle of conduct from his. She drew him away from all that angry confusion of tongues and tempers into her own private sanctum, and then gave him account of what had passed during his absence. He told her his news regarding the failure of the divorce suit, and she feelingly expressed her sorrow and regret.

"He has married her," said he, in a low voice, "of

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that I am positive. Hence his violent disappointment. She spoke of him as her husband in such a way as to leave no doubt in one's mind that a ceremony of some sort had been gone through in London before they came here together as man and wife."

"Oh, Lor'!" ejaculated his better half, beside herself with astonishment. "What is to be done now? It will be a downright case of bigamy if she strikes up nasty when she once hears the truth."

"Whatever happens I must follow the master," said the faithful retainer; "I won't gain anything by siding against him. He has been a good master to me, and I have nothing to do with his wrong-doings. The old Viscount is dying, and very soon it will be 'my lord' that we shall have to serve."

The short conference ended here, and Hunt betook himself to the library, where he was told he would see Mr Hamilton in a state of collapse.

"I have been dosing him with brandy all day; he is too dazed to do much mischief now," said Mrs Hunt, complacently.

Rowland was stretched out at full length on a couch, a picture of limp misery and drunken exhaustion combined. The small table at his elbow bore the remains of brandy, and a glass half-filled with it stood ready for his pleasure. Hunt had opened the door in his noiseless, tiger-cat fashion, and had shut it again before his advent was observed.

Rowland half raised himself from the cushion against which his head rested, and stared at his valet. Hunt thought he had never seen such a look on any countenance but that of a madman—or some wild animal brought to bay after a heavy chase.

"It is all over, Hunt, all over," was his husky, half-inaudible greeting. "You only arrive to confirm bad news, which has travelled faster than you have."

Hunt bowed respectfully, and in a low, grieved voice said, "I am sorry, sir, that things have turned out as

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they have, and that you have been ill through it. I have done my best, as the evidence will go to show, but there was no getting over Sir Edward ; his cross-examination was enough to puzzle the devil himself."

"Why did you not return yesterday? Who gave you leave to stop the night in town?" demanded Rowland, angrily.

"Well, sir," replied Hunt, unhesitatingly, "I thought there might be a wire at Kensington House this morning with news of my lord's health."

"Well, and have you brought any?" There was a gleam of hope in Rowland's flushed, perturbed countenance. In his wildest mood he had counted on his father's death as some sort of relief to his guilty conscience.

"No, sir!" responded the confidential valet, noting the expression, and wishing that he could indeed gratify him by having the right to address him as "my lord." "I heard one of the judges say that the Viscount was not long for this world, and that it was a shame—"

"I don't wish to hear the judicial opinion on my filial neglect, thank you; possibly my character has suffered for the last three days, but as long as the newspapers do not get hold of the story, what does it matter?" He paused, as though inspired with a sudden idea too fearful to contemplate; then when he did speak, after the interval of a few minutes, his voice was almost pleading in its tone.

"What is to be done now, Hunt? I can't marry her as I wish to: I am undone, and she—she will never forgive me when she knows the truth. Would to God I had never brought her here! I am the most miserable man alive—there is positively no hope for me!" He turned his face away on the cushion and an hysterical sob escaped him: he was in that state from drink and excitement when tears would have been an infinite relief. His tornado of passion had worn itself out into a ceaseless desire for sympathy, and a curious longing to know

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the worst. In his extremity, however, he did not neglect necessary caution, hence his acknowledgment that he could not marry Meta under the present circumstances. He felt all along that Hunt and his wife had their suspicions, and he was resolved, with that instinct of self-preservation natural to the human, or rather the criminal, race, to preserve his secret, no matter what happened, and to fight it out, even with the woman he had injured and deceived, rather than betray it.

Hunt, thus appealed to, offered his advice and sympathy with that air of perfect deference becoming in a dependant to his master.

"I shouldn't worry about it, sir, things are sure to turn out right in the end. If you are tired of this place, sir, how would it be to take Mrs Hamilton yachting with you until the affair is blown over? In the meantime I should keep her from hearing the truth : my wife, I am sure, will take every precaution about that."

"Yachting !" repeated Rowland. "I never thought of that ; your head is worth two of mine, Hunt. I will see to carrying it out as soon as I hear the final news from Castle Rowland." He spoke with evident satisfaction at the hopes with which the idea had inspired him. Once on the high seas, with a select crew around him, he could fear nothing for the safety of his secret. Meta would still be in his power, and his prolonged union with her would add daily to the influence he already held over her person.

Whilst he was thus hatching new plots, and refreshing his exhausted intellect with breezy aspirations that it would yet be all well with him in the end, there was heard a half-timid, half-eager knock at the door, and on Hunt hastening forward to see who the intruder was, Meta's clear, silvery voice broke the spell of his reflections.

"It is I, Rowland ; I have a letter for you from your father. A courier has just brought it."

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CHAPTER XLI

“MY POOR FATHER ! HOW I HAVE DECEIVED HIM !”

SHE advanced to Rowland, who was now sitting up, no longer desponding, but with an eager gesture snatched the letter from her outstretched hand.

Let me explain how she came by it.

After Hunt had left her she sauntered up the avenue, and on approaching the gate saw that a man on horse-back was just on the point of dismounting in order to open it. There was no lodge to the entrance.

Meta, surprised at the sight of a visitor, and yet observing that this one was no gentleman, asked him what he wanted.

“Is this Worthley Hall ?” he demanded abruptly, as he guided his horse carefully through.

“Yes,” replied Meta, astonished at his freedom of manner ; and assuming a dignity intended to awe him, she asked if his business was with Mr Hamilton.

“Mr Hamilton,” echoed the fellow, remounting. “I don’t know any such person. My business is with my Lord Viscount Rowland, and I was told that I would find him at Worthley Hall.”

He turned on his saddle as he spoke and stared rudely at the young girlish figure in white.

Meta blushed furiously, though her heart swelled with gratification when she took in the meaning of the announcement.

“Is the old Viscount dead, then ? Who sent you here ?”

“His lordship’s solicitors at Ely Place. I have brought a letter from Castle Rowland with news of the old lord’s death.”

My Poor Father!

"Give me the letter," said Meta, imperiously. She was possessed with a burning desire to take it herself to Rowland and be the first to impart him the news.

"I had strict injunctions, miss, not to give it up to anyone but to my lord," replied the man, stolidly.

"But I am the Viscountess Rowland," was the dignified retort. "You could not possibly see the new Viscount. He has been very much upset all this morning and will see no one."

"It is about the divorce suit then," said the courier, more to himself, and so thunderstruck at her declaration that *she* was the Viscountess Rowland that his eyes seemed protruding out of his head in sheer amazement and wonder. He formed one of the household at Kensington Palace Gardens, and so was well aware of all that was going on in the private life of his master.

"What divorce suit do you mean?" she asked sharply. "And what has a divorce suit to do with the late Viscount's death? You must be tipsy, I think."

"Not I, madam," returned the courier, irritably. "I have ridden post-haste from Worcester; I wanted to catch Mr Hunt at St Pancras this morning in order to give him the letters for my lord. But it was too late, so I came by the corresponding train from Euston Station, which arrives at Worcester twenty minutes later. I hired this horse at the mews there, and have ridden ten miles without a stop, for the news is urgent."

He mopped his forehead and again stared at Meta.

"You must be tired," said she, sympathetically. "But if you will give me the letters I will myself take them to the Viscount, and you can go round to the servants' hall and get the cook to give you something to eat and drink."

The idea of refreshment settled the matter; without any further reluctance or argument the two important documents were handed over to her keeping, and she hastened on her way to the library, where, as it has been seen, she found the insane fiend of the morning clothed

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and in his right mind. Hunt, who had in vain tried to bar her eager progress, still stood near the door, doubtful as to how Rowland would be affected by the news of his father's death.

Meta was at first too much occupied with her thoughts and her natural anxiety for her lover to heed the valet's presence. Rowland had read first one letter, then the other, and his face had turned a deathly hue as he still stared at the open sheet before him.

"Well, Rowland, what is it?" said she, breaking the silence at last, and impatient to know the contents, which seemed so to overwhelm him. He roused himself at the sound of her voice, only to crush the letters together, as though afraid that she should see them. Meta continued vexedly :—

"The courier who brought these told me that the old Viscount was dead, and he said something about a divorce suit—" She was interrupted by a violent cry from Rowland, which she misinterpreted for the moment as a cry of overwhelming grief. Instantly she was beside him, holding his trembling hand caressingly, and bidding him be of good cheer as she was there to comfort him. She felt then she liked him all the better for this exhibition of his filial sorrow.

Hunt had slipped out of the room, feeling that the atmosphere was hotter than he liked. He was no coward, but in this case he considered discretion was the better part of valour, and he hurriedly went in search of that blundering courier, who was then drinking a glass of shandy-gaff to the cook's good temper, and inquiring who the pretty young lady was who had declared herself to be the Viscountess Rowland.

"Dearest, kindest husband," murmured Meta in her tenderest manner, as she pressed his head to her and kissed him many times by way of consolation, "I never cared for you so much as now when you are in want of my sympathy. I was selfish to feel so glad, but I could not help myself. I thought that it would be a relief to

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all your worries to know that you were your own master and could do as you liked. Perhaps you feel it all the more since you were not with him in his last hours? It was your tender love for me that kept you away from him. Never mind, dearest, I will make up to you in every way I can, and you shall have no reason to doubt my love." Again and again she embraced him, but that cry he had uttered seemed to have robbed him of every vestige of strength. He lay in her arms like one in a swoon.

She did not lose her presence of mind, nor would she call for help. She laid his head low on the couch, loosened his cravat, and dashed some cold water on his face. Then she took his hands and chafed them, for they were deadly cold. As she did so the two letters in his grip fell on the floor with a rustle. She picked them up and glanced at them curiously. Then a great desire filled her soul to read them: the first words, "My dear son," in one caught her eye. This was from his father; surely, she reasoned, there could be no harm in her seeing what the old Viscount had to say for himself.

Her curiosity mastered her, and forgetting aught else, she read, word for word, the following, written in a scratchy, shaky hand:—

"MY DEAR SON,—Jacobson tells me that I ought to have you with me as the end is very near. He has, however, alarmed me so often about my health that I begin to doubt whether he will ever guess rightly. I have been told about your final rupture with Stella, and about the case that is now proceeding in court. If she is, and has been, guilty, I do most fervently hope that you will obtain your divorce. It is very necessary that you should marry again, and I trust and pray that your second venture will prove happier, and that you will ultimately have an heir to succeed you.

"The sands of time are run in my case, but I shall die happy to think that my dear and only son will have

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got rid of the woman who has been a blot on his honour.

"Come as soon as you get this; Jacobson is right for once. I fear me my time is very near. Your mother's presence seems always with me. It is a sign that I shall soon be with her. God bless you, my dear Jack, and come soon.—Your ever affectionate father,

"ROWLAND."

Then mechanically, and yet painfully, the bewildered woman looked at the other letter in her hand. She had learnt so much that was strange and incomprehensible, surely she must learn more in order to be able to understand fully what she had already gleaned from the dying Viscount's farewell epistle! It was from the family physician, Dr Jacobson, and gave a short but affecting account of his patient's death.

"I am sorry," it ran, "to have to write you the sad news of your noble father's end. He breathed his last about three o'clock this morning. I had sent a special messenger to London with the hopes of getting you down here in time, but a wire was received saying that you had left town and your whereabouts not known by any of the household at Kensington. The dear Viscount insisted upon writing to you last night—I enclose the letter. He was constantly referring to you in his conversation, and hoping that you would succeed in getting your divorce. Of this he was most particularly anxious and troubled. About midnight I came in to see if he was resting quietly, but he was awake, and on seeing me desired that the valet and I should remain with him. He spoke of you all the time, and related one or two anecdotes of your boyhood, and repeatedly asserted that the late Lady Rowland, your honoured mother, was standing by his bedside waiting for him to join her. His last words were, 'Tell my son to uphold the honour of our house intact; to allow nothing by which that

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honour may be impeached.' He died almost immediately after this.

"I need not, of course, desire your presence. You will come, I know, as soon as you get this.—Believe me, my dear lord, yours very sincerely,

"RONALD JACOBSON.

"*P.S.*—The news has just arrived this morning of the failure of your divorce suit. I am truly sorry for your disappointment. The dear Viscount has been spared this. Please accept my sincere sympathy."

Meta put her hand to her forehead as though endeavouring to understand to the utmost the meaning of all that she had read. Gradually, gradually, the truth unfolded itself to her bewildered brain. One by one the mystery of Rowland's behaviour was revealed to her, and she stood there near his couch as though turned to stone at the realisation of the awful story. If not his wife, what was she? If a former wife existed, she, Meta, had been tricked to a false marriage, and was no more than a courtesan in the eyes of the law—his mistress, not his wife; she was Meta Benson still, and not the Viscountess Rowland of her happy ambitious dreams. Oh, God! was this true? Was it a bad, wicked dream, a delusion of the fancy that was possessing her like a nightmare and petrifying her every sense into a death-like marble calm? She gazed on the unconscious face of the man who had betrayed her, and her eyes seemed to penetrate into his very soul and caused him to shudder even in his swoon. The electric current of her rage, her bewilderment, her grief, or whatever else you may call it, the intense passion by which she was swayed, seemed to rouse him from his stupor, for soon, with a miserable shudder of his whole frame, Rowland opened his eyes and met those of his victim. He started to a sitting posture and endeavoured to take her hand.

She moved from him as if he had been a snake; her

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eyes were still immovably fixed on him. Then he caught sight of the open letters in her hand, and his scattered senses, like lightning, realised all at once the state of affairs.

"You have read those?" he asked, pointing to them, and speaking in a voice husky with the great fear throbbing in his heart.

She did not immediately reply, but moved further away from him. The blood returned to her cheeks; the scintillating glare of just wrath sparkled in her eyes, yet her manner was preternaturally calm as she put this astounding question to him,—

"Am I your lawful wife, Rowland?"

He made no answer.

"It was the failure of your divorce case then that put you in such a rage this morning, was it not?" she continued calmly. "The pretty mock ceremony at the Registrar's was only a farce of a ceremony then, for, having a wife already, I could not be your wife even if I had gone through a hundred marriage rites with you. Am I your wife, Rowland, or am I not?"

"Would to God that you were, Meta," was his fervent response.

"Do not take God's name on your lips, for it is rank blasphemy when uttered by you. If I am not your wife what are you in the eyes of the law? A bigamist! That was your crime when you deceived me with a mock marriage—and your crime has made me what I would rather die than be—your mistress—a woman for all other women to scorn and upbraid—a light woman—a degraded, false character, and the victim of your unlawful passion. Oh, God of mercy! that I should live to see this hour and know the depth and bitterness of my fall!"

"It was my mad love for you that drove me to such extremities. Forgive me, Meta. God knows I meant well by you."

She went on as if she heard him not: to Rowland she seemed an incarnation of rage, yet the woman was

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magnificent in her fury. Every word she uttered thrilled him through and through with an ineffable feeling of self-contempt, of bitter remorse at the evil he had done her.

"Oh, if your father had lived a day longer, and I had known of this your crime, I should have gone straight to him and told him all the story of my shame and the burning facts of your felony; for felony it is, and, peer as you are, you shall be convicted of it. Your honour" (and she sneered at the word) "shall be impeached before all the world, and your dead father's memory shall come before you with the mocking remembrance of his last words—to hold the honour of your house intact and to allow nothing by which it may be called in question. But I, the victim of dishonour, shall dishonour you before your equals, and my ruin shall be dearly bought, for it will be at the price of your disgrace, your fall, your utmost shame and sorrow. I will make you likewise feel every throb that the memory of my ruin brings me: you shall suffer alike with your victim. My revenge will be sweet to me, but it will be as gall and wormwood to you and your cursed pride."

She seemed transformed into another being, with no more the likeness of the old, impulsive, affectionate Meta who had vowed always to love him, always to believe and trust in him. The terrible revulsion of feeling, of disappointment, of utter despair at the cruel deception practised on her credulity, the sharp, sudden blow to her vanity and self-esteem, all tended to increase her ungovernable fury: even his very servants, she thought, knew of her false position, and sneered at her presumption in passing herself as his wife. Perhaps no other wrong done her was felt so keenly as this one wrong to her *amour propre*. Meta felt she could forgive everything but this.

Rowland had risen from the couch and was now standing facing her. Her threats to expose him fell on his ear like a thunder-clap; his countenance was

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distorted with terror at the thought. But he had sufficiently recovered to show fight and resistance.

"You may do what you like," he said defiantly ; "and you may do your worst. But I should advise you to think well before you act rashly. In the first place, you have no documentary evidence to show that I ever went through the marriage ceremony with you. You do not even know the locality where the affair took place ; you have no witnesses to bring forward ; the Registrar himself would never be able to identify me, since I was in disguise ; you would be taken up for a madwoman ; my superior influence and powers will put the little you possess to utter confusion, and in the end you will have exposed your fall for nothing. Be wise, be guided by me, I am always willing to be your friend and protector. Believe me when I tell you that had I obtained a divorce I should have made you really and truly my wife ; but it seems Providence warred itself against me. I am not able to fulfil my promise, but I am willing to forget and forgive all the hard cruel things you have said to me, and take you again to my favour, if you will abandon your present tragic behaviour and be again my—"

"Be silent," she interrupted furiously, "and cease to insult me. I want neither your love, your protection, nor your favour—but what I want is justice, which is meted to the highest as well as to the most degraded. I shall take means to advertise for the Registrar who married us, and his book will show sufficient documentary evidence against you. You will find you have an injured woman to deal with and not the guileless and innocent girl whom you deceived with your falsehood. There is your father's letter" (she flung it at him), "take it, it is like the voice of the dead revealing to me the story of my wrongs. May his ghost haunt you and make all your future life an eternal nightmare ! I hate you, loathe you, and scorn you ; you have killed the heart within me, but my soul will live to curse you all your life !"

The Cunning Fury of a Madwoman

CHAPTER XLII

THE CUNNING FURY OF A MADWOMAN

HE was not long left alone. Hunt entered with a troubled countenance to tell him the mischief the courier had done in the servants' hall. Rowland listened with an air of indifference, and then advancing to the bell rang it violently. A footman answered timidly, but on seeing that Hunt was in the room gathered courage as he stood awaiting his master's pleasure.

"You are not the only one I wish to interview," said Rowland, imperiously. "Go and desire every domestic in my household to attend me here instantly."

The wondering footman obeyed, and in a few minutes the room was nearly filled with the male and female denizens that formed the establishment.

Rowland stood with his back to the mantelpiece, a dignified, commanding presence, his mien haughty and composed as he surveyed them.

"I am told," he began disdainfully, "that you have all given warning to-day. I desire that you will leave every one of you instantly. Your month's wages will be paid to you, also one month's board in lieu of notice. I give you just one hour to make your preparations. Do you understand?"

Had he appeared one whit less the master they would have made some excuse or other about leaving their several duties unfinished, but there was a hard, relentless look on his face which cowed them, and they turned to quit the room defiantly, determined to obey his orders as fast as hands and feet would enable them.

Hunt stood by, the statue of patience and wonder-

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ment. He had guessed Rowland's thoughts and felt that the game was not played out yet.

The courier, Jenkins, who had brought the news, was then called in, and he was sharply reprimanded for gossiping.

"I do not wish to dismiss you," said his master, very graciously, "because you have been a discreet servant hitherto. Your duty will keep you at Worthley Hall until I return from Castle Rowland. Hunt will direct you what to do when I am gone." He then spoke rapidly to his valet, giving him many directions and commands to help Mrs Hunt in the care of Mrs Hamilton's comfort and welfare.

In an hour's time anyone calling at Worthley would have been astonished at the general air of emptiness prevailing within the mansion. The exodus had indeed taken place, and there were only left Hunt and his wife and the courier. The latter believing that he had unwittingly been the cause of the domestic disestablishment, offered for the time being to be factotum. Mrs Hunt was set to watch her mistress and to keep the rooms of her suite locked against all intruders.

Then came the evil thought to Rowland to keep the angry, vindictive woman he had seduced a prisoner at Worthley until such time as it was convenient for him to release her.

He explained to his valet what that acute individual had already guessed, and received his sympathy and promises of co-adjutorship.

"You will remain here, Hunt, and help your wife to watch Mrs Hamilton. She suffers, let me tell you, from delusions, and fancies that she is really and truly my wife. The shock of the divorce suit has been too much for her brain, and her mind is certainly affected. I wish her to remain under surveillance until I have performed a son's duty to my poor father. Her violence, I fear, might cause me discomfort during my absence; of course she is naturally as disappointed as I am at not

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being able to marry me, and it has been a cursed misfortune all round; but you will understand how necessary it is for her to keep quiet for the next fortnight or so," he continued confidentially, and then favoured the obliging retainer with many mysterious hints about women's temper and tongues.

Hunt nodded intelligently, and proceeded to make such preparations for his master's departure as were needful. He knew he would be paid well for what he did, and the knowledge brought with it the usual encouragement.

There was a train leaving Worcester at eight o'clock that evening for London, and after he had partaken of some refreshment Rowland left Worthley, riding to the station on the very horse that had carried Jenkins. His reflections as he rode down the avenue were painfully contradictory. He remembered the mad joy he had felt two short weeks ago when, with Meta by his side, he had gone to that very house anticipating long days of perfect happiness and contentment; and now the end had come but too quickly. His dreams were shattered, his hopes blighted, and she for whom he had sacrificed so much was his enemy, hating and despising him for what he had done, and determining to be revenged on him. He felt her reproaches bitterly; they were unjust, since they were uttered at a time when his bereavement ought to have silenced her and reduced her to pity for his disappointment. Why were women such insensate fools when, with a little more consideration and less vanity, they might still be made happy with all that their vain hearts could wish? He could not help the failure of the divorce suit. She had behaved as if he could: it was feminine folly on her part to threaten him; any disclosures of his perfidy would only bring about her ruin and public disgrace. She would suffer much more in reputation than he, and it was a mere chance whether people would believe her story. At anyrate a fortnight's immurement within the walls of

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Worthley would cool her temper ; possibly she might, after due consideration and pondering over the situation, give up her wild idea of advertising for the Registrar who had married them, since, by so doing, she would invite that vulgar notoriety and scandal which, he believed, as a gentlewoman, she would shrink from. No, he was certainly doing the best for her under the present circumstances by detaining her a state prisoner until she was disposed to be more reasonable.

Thus reflecting, and consoling his guilty conscience, Rowland galloped along the hilly, uneven road that led to Worcester. The train he travelled by reached London at eleven, giving him ample time to catch the midnight express from Waterloo to Castle Rowland in the county of Hampshire.

Meanwhile, how fared it with the unfortunate woman he had left in the charge of his three menials ?

On reaching her bed-chamber, whither she had retired, Meta locked herself in, and tried in vain to check the hot, burning tears of shame and disappointment which flowed in spite of all. There were many causes to make her weep, and the more she thought of these causes the faster her tears streamed and the harder grew the feeling of revenge that possessed her. One thing became very clear to her amidst all that storm of hate and bewildering trouble, and this was that she must leave Worthley immediately. As long as she remained in it she could do nothing, for she was practically, as it were, consenting to Rowland's sin, and the very thought of this inspired her with a great desire to kill him outright ; the idea of murder even in her excessive passion was sweet. She wondered as she sat there, in all her solitary misery, whether she could indeed achieve this crime when he was sleeping by plunging the very dagger he had given her for an ornament into that false, wicked heart of his. She made no effort to quell this insane desire, but encouraged it, and hugged it to her soul as a means by

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which she would sate the passion of revenge. Oh, how she hated him, loathed him, and cursed him a thousand times in her heart for the terrible ruin he had brought on her ! She was no saint, but merely a woman of flesh and blood under the influence of an irretrievable wrong, and the realisation of it was fast driving her mad.

She sat thus brooding over her trouble until her attention was drawn to some hasty movements in the adjoining chamber, which was used as Rowland's dressing-room, and which communicated with the apartment she was in. She looked about her fearfully, thinking that it was he himself so near her, and she was not prepared to carry out her desire of killing him. She would wait until it was long past midnight, when the whole household lay in repose, and then she would noiselessly enter that room, where she knew he would pass the night, for there was a bed there on which he had often reclined, and then she would— She laughed to herself at the thought of her cunning, and rising from her chair she advanced hastily to the dressing-table, where she had left the little jewelled dagger—the first love-token she had ever received from him. There it lay, all exposed in its velvet case—a pretty toy set with precious stones and bearing on its hilt these mysterious words, "*Amor vincit omnia*." She took it in her hand and examined the inscription, smiling softly as the meaning of it became clear to her.

"Love conquers all," she repeated to herself, passing the flat of the weapon caressingly against her cheek. "Ah, yes, it shall indeed prove invincible ; his love and my hate united in one boundless tie of blood, blood, blood." She shuddered painfully at the repetition of the word and the horrible picture it seemed to create in her disordered mind.

When Rowland was asleep she would go and kill him ; in the meantime she must be quiet and cautious and not betray by the smallest sign that she meant to do him harm, in case he would guard himself against her and

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thus elude her revenge. These were the burden of her thoughts as she stood near the door of communication and listened with throbbing heart and brain to the movements that were still going on in the dressing-room.

Then a great fear flashed before her that perhaps after all he might not sleep there since she had parted from him so angrily ; and as the house was large, and there were many bedchambers in it, possibly she would never succeed in finding his sleeping-quarters for that night, and then all her scheme of vengeance would be thwarted.

Collecting her scattered wits in one great effort of self-control, she gently rapped on the door.

"Rowland," she cried in her most affectionate, wheedling tone, "Rowland, dear one, do not mind my cruel words to you ; I did not think you would take them so much to heart. Indeed, I like to fancy that you will sleep there to-night to be near me ; and to-morrow, who knows, Rowland, but I may forgive and forget all and be again your love, your affectionate, kindest love."

There was a silence ; then she saw the handle of the door turn, but she had locked it, and not wishing that he should intrude on her then, for the clock on the mantelpiece only pointed to the ninth hour, she added, in an even softer voice,—

"I cannot see you to-night, Rowland, for my distress is still too great. To-morrow, Rowland, to-morrow I will forget and forgive all."

There was no answer ; the movements continued in the next room, then all was still. She heard the outer door of the dressing-room shut once more, and someone enter as though retiring for the night.

"He will sleep there," she breathed excitedly. "He will be in my power ; soon, soon I shall have avenged myself of the great wrong done me. Oh, God of mercy, how I thank Thee !"

It was the joy of a madwoman : it needed all her

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strength and cunning to control the wild beating of her heart, and to cool her burning face she went to the open window and swallowed great draughts of the delicious evening air. Such a lovely starry night it was ! a blue Italian sky sparkling with a thousand gems, and the new crescent moon shone just sufficiently to light up the old-fashioned terrace stretched out before her. She could see the long shadows the ornamental statuary threw on the lawn and the flower-beds. To her excited imagination each shadow seemed like a ghost of the man she meant to kill, and she watched them with a weird fascination born of the mania which possessed her. She already saw Rowland dead before her with the dagger thrust deep into his wicked heart ; Rowland once dead, she would never again feel all the misery and ruin he had brought on her ; she would be at peace then, at peace with herself and all the world. Oh, God ! what joy was there in the thought !

Again she took up the stiletto, and again she glanced at the timepiece. It was now eleven ; another hour or so and he would be sleeping ; she must be patient or she would spoil all. She stretched herself on the luxurious couch the chamber contained, resolved to rest until it was time : it was necessary to husband all her strength for the great ordeal ; she needed nerve, and a little repose would give it her.

It was also intensely quiet, so sleep-inviting in its perfect stillness, that, soothed by the soft cushions, the cool balmy air that blew in from the open window, she unwittingly fell asleep, and in her sleep dreamt that she had indeed murdered her false lover, and that he lay bathed in his blood before her. She dreamt she was steeping both hands in his blood, and tasting it, wondering within her whether it would taste half so bitter as her hate and loathing of him, when she awoke from the horrible vision feeling as if some evil thing had touched her. She sat up on the couch and looked around : the clock was still ticking on the mantelpiece, the

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jewelled dagger, Rowland's choicest gift, that had once belonged to his mother, was still on her lap, and in looking at it she remembered her dream, her intention to kill him, and as her waking faculties gradually took in the situation she could hear the heavy breathing of a person asleep in the dressing-room ; she instantly rose from the couch and stealthily advanced to the door. Now was the time ; the moment had come at last, she thought, as, gently and noiselessly, she unlocked the door, and opening it, entered.

Oh, how her heart beat, how quick and gaspingly her breath came and went, too quick, too excited to allow her at first to move, as she stood for one whole minute at the threshold and stared around her.

The glimmer of a night-light was enough to show her where her enemy lay. The room was spacious, and the bed stood in the centre, with its handsome drapery of crimson and gold. Like her own chamber it was richly carpeted, and the heaviest foot would fall but lightly on it. How often she had entered this room whilst Rowland was dressing, glorying in all her new-born privileges as wife, and proud of the fact that she was necessary to his existence. Oh, God ! to think of it, and now she was no wife of his—he had duped and betrayed her ; his perfidy had made her what maddened her to remember then, a memory that nerved her for her task, for with renewed courage, and eyes and bosom dilating with the tremendous passion of a moment, she glided like a serpent to the bed, raised her hand, which held the now naked weapon, and brought it down heavily on the unconscious sleeper.

There was heard a terrible shriek, and oh, horror ! it was not Rowland she had stabbed after all ; but Mrs Hunt, her faithful waiting-woman, with blood streaming from a wound on the shoulder, sat up in bed, staring at her, and uttering scream after scream of terror and pain.

In the Furnace of Affliction

CHAPTER XLIII

IN THE FURNACE OF AFFLICTION

WHEN her eyes met those of the terrified woman, a feeling like that of death came over Meta, and she fell unconscious by the bedside, just as Hunt rushed into the room, followed by Jenkins. They each carried a light, which plainly revealed to them what had happened. The valet's cry of horror at the sight of his wife with the dagger still planted in her shoulder was painful to hear.

"She is mad, Hunt!" gasped the poor woman. "She thought I was the master, and tried to kill me in my sleep." The suffering creature could say no more but fainted away from loss of blood.

"Here's a nice night's work," cried Jenkins, staring bewildered around. "If you want to see murder done in high life come to a quiet house in the country and no one will be any the wiser."

"Hold your tongue!" cried Hunt, beside himself. "And if you have any sense about you, hand me some brandy from that cabinet there and help me to bind up this wound."

Jenkins obeyed, giving all the assistance he could. It was lucky that Rowland kept a relay of spirits in his dressing-room for the relief of his troublesome nerves. Hunt knew where to seek for all he wanted. He found, on examination, that the wound inflicted on his wife was not very deep or dangerous; it had not touched the shoulder-bone, though it needed all his skill to stanch the bleeding, which was profuse.

Whilst his fingers were thus busy his mind was much perturbed in regard to the unconscious form that still lay unattended to on the floor. Jenkins had offered to

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raise her and bring her round, but he had been flatly refused. "I will see to her myself," said Hunt. "She won't hurt to lie there a while longer for the mischief she has done. I wish, in heaven's name, my lord was here!"

He wondered what would Rowland's feelings be when he should hear of this fresh catastrophe. His wife at that moment recovered from her swoon, and on remembering what had taken place, faintly asked if it was all well with Mrs Hamilton; then seeing that no attention had been paid to her, insisted that she should be carried to the next room and every restorative applied to revive her immediately.

This was accordingly done, though it was some little time before they succeeded in restoring her to consciousness.

What a terrible coming to it was! A sickening shuddering of the whole body, and then the strange, gradual uplifting of the veil of memory to tell her what she had done, and the madness of a deed which nothing would ever obliterate from her mind. She saw Hunt standing by the couch with a glass of some cordial he had been pouring into her lips. It was his wife she had murdered. "Fly from me, Hunt," she cried, sitting up suddenly, her eyes all wild with terror. "I have killed her; I have killed your wife; I thought it was your master." Then she burst into discordant fits of laughter; one fit succeeded another, and ever and anon came the constant refrain, "I killed her in her sleep; I thought it was your master." She sprang from the couch and ran round and round the room, screaming, singing, laughing, the veriest madwoman that ever saddened human sight.

Then suddenly, in the midst of her antics, Mrs Hunt appeared at the open door, and Meta, on seeing her, stood for one moment stupefied with terror.

"It is her ghost!" she shrieked wildly. "It is her ghost come to haunt me! Oh, Hunt, Hunt, tell her to go back to the devil!"

In the Furnace of Affliction

"Make her smell this," said the waiting-woman, holding out a phial to her husband.

He held her fast whilst he applied the drug to her nostrils, which almost instantly threw her into a lethargy. She was then placed on the bed, and Mrs Hunt, with all the remaining strength she was possessed of, attended to her.

Days of mental aberration followed; she was never again violent and troublesome, but her condition was such as to excite the greatest anxiety in the minds of her keepers. No doctor was summoned, for Hunt, fearing publicity, stoutly refused to expose himself to Rowland's displeasure. The fidelity and devotion of this man to his master on this trying occasion was indeed marvellous. Rowland's secrets were his, and he guarded them so well that not a soul in Worthley had the smallest suspicion of what had taken place within the Hall. His wife's injury rapidly healed, and she was a close attendant on the sick lady.

Rowland, in the course of a day or two, received a guardedly-expressed letter from Hunt, giving him a brief but cheering account of the misfortune that had befallen his wife, and his respectful assurances that all would yet be well with his dear lord, whom he heartily rejoiced had escaped a terrible disaster. "Your lordship will understand," the letter ran, "how necessary it was for us to hush up the business and to wait upon Mrs Hamilton ourselves rather than send for strange doctors and nurses, who might only ask awkward questions and suspect mischief. Everything is done for your lady's comfort that can be done under the circumstances, and my wife seldom leaves her. As soon as your lordship can come to us I shall be glad, for the responsibility sometimes is greater than I care to undertake. But, being ever your devoted friend and servant in word and deed, I am willing to do anything to further your happiness."

He, and a vast number of condoling friends, had that very morning performed the last rites of burial, and he had seen the coffin lowered into the family vault, won-

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dering when he too would lie side by side with his father. All the pomp and panoply of state which had accompanied the ceremony had left him sad and melancholy, and he was glad, when the guests were gone, to retire into his own room, where he could indulge in his mixed feelings of grief for all that had occurred. There on the escritoire lay Hunt's letter awaiting his perusal. He had snatched it up, reading it eagerly, for he was hungry for news of Meta. Alas! the intelligence he received of her insane attempt to kill and her subsequent violence were certainly not conducive to cheer him on this saddest of all days. He silently congratulated himself that he had taken his departure when he did; had he slept that night at Worthley he would have been a dead man. The idea made him feel sick with horror. It was strange to believe that this woman whom he had loved so passionately could be a would-be murderess even in thought. He felt then he could never again approach her, or desire even to behold her again. He read his servant's letter over once more, and bethought him in what way he could reward Hunt for so much devotion. The fellow was worth his weight in gold, and Rowland had it now in his power to pay him well for thus serving his interests.

In the first place, what should be done with Meta? It was pretty clear that she must on no account be left to her own resources. There was no doubt but that she would give him trouble, unless indeed she remained chronically mad; if so, a private madhouse would be essential. His secret would be safe then. No one would believe the ravings of a madwoman. The reflection was at first revolting; he hated to imagine that bright, handsome, high-spirited creature, so recently the object of so much love and tenderness, an inmate of a lunatic asylum, the companion of soulless, repulsive imbeciles. No, the thought was not pleasant, and he put it away from him as another and a better one occupied his mind. In attempting Mrs Hunt's life she

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had laid herself open to the counter-charge of attempted murder, therefore this fact alone would prevent her from prosecuting him for bigamy; possibly this astounding fact also would for ever silence her. He grasped at the idea as a consolatory hint against all future danger, and his reply to Hunt was almost cheerful in its tone.

"I desire," he wrote, "that you and your wife will still continue the care of Mrs Hamilton until I am able to come and bring affairs to a head. Treat her with all possible kindness and respect, but on no account allow her to wander alone, either in the garden or about the house. It will be my duty to make every compensation to your wife for the injury she has received at Mrs Hamilton's hands."

These and many other injunctions the letter contained kept the devoted trio at Worthley pretty busy in the performance of their duties. There were many legal letters in connection with the business of the estate requiring his immediate attention, and amongst their number was one from his wife's solicitor, informing him that the lady was suing for judicial separation and alimony as Viscountess Rowland.

CHAPTER XLIV

CONVALESCENCE

HER extreme youth and vitality carried Meta triumphantly through the mental crisis of her illness. In a fortnight's time she gave but small trouble so far as personal attendance was concerned. She embarrassed Mrs Hunt not a little by her constant solicitude for that individual's health and her anxiety to spare her as much as possible.

"Immediately I am strong enough to act for

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myself," she said one day to Hunt and his wife, "I shall leave Worthley and you will never hear of me again."

The faithful couple exchanged glances; they had become attached to their patient, she had interested as well as fascinated them. They were sorry for her also; as Rowland's wife she would have been adorable.

It seemed months to Meta that short fortnight's illness—when she lay day after day brooding over what she had done, and sometimes weeping over the misfortunes that had led up to it; all her life long she would never recover from the effects of that brain shock.

She had often wondered why Rowland never approached her bedside, and was infinitely relieved by it. She was ignorant of his departure from Worthley, also of the dispersion of the household. She hoped he was waiting for her to break the connection once and for all, and this, perhaps, was the reason why his presence had been conspicuous by its absence. It was when her mental recovery was sufficient to enable her to think and wonder at all that she commenced thus to ponder over the past and shrink with concern from the immediate future.

Hunt had heard her remark as he gently laid her luncheon-tray on a table near her and waited about in the morning-room in order to relieve his wife.

Meta had insisted on Mrs Hunt settling herself in a comfortable easy-chair and had herself arranged the cushion for the injured shoulder. But to Hunt her manner was always distant and dignified; she realised now the part he had taken in deceiving her, and longed for the time when she should be clear of the sight of any man or woman who had been a witness of her shame. She felt, however, she could forgive Susannah Hunt a great deal, since that woman had only confessed herself an instrument in the hands of two unprincipled men and had nearly fallen a victim to her servitude.

Convalescence

Meta looked at the dainty victuals set out on the tray and turned from the inspection with disgust. She had no appetite, and the very smell of food sometimes made her sick.

"You must eat, my dear young lady, if you desire to get back your strength," said Susannah, observantly. "The less nourishment you take, the less chance there is of your ever being able to leave Worthley."

Meta looked alarmed, then, seeing the truth of the remark, instantly applied herself to the unpleasant task of eating without relish. She hated herself almost for every mouthful she took, since the food had been procured at Rowland's expense.

"You can take it away now," she said to Hunt when she had finished, "and you need not return. I wish to be alone for the rest of the afternoon."

Hunt glanced meaningly at his wife as he left the room with the tray, and Meta, seeing it, with some haughtiness desired the waiting-woman to retire.

"You had better go and lie down and rest your shoulder," said she. "I shall not want you again until tea is ready."

Susannah smiled but did not move from her seat. "I must on no account leave you all that time," she responded cheerfully. "It would be bad for you."

"And why?" asked Meta, wonderingly.

"Because the great brain-doctor who prescribed for you when you were unconscious bade us be sure to have you always in sight; solitude to one in your excitable state would be fatal." The woman spoke with conviction, though she knew she was uttering a lie.

"Why does not this doctor continue his visits since I am not really quite recovered?" demanded Meta, who had her doubts as to whether this was true.

"Because he is a London doctor, and therefore his visits cannot be frequent, considering the journey. But I have followed his directions minutely, and I think, Mrs Hamilton, you have much to be thankful for," she

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concluded. She was disposed to be indulgent, but she could not forget her husband's injunctions or the fact that she had received a liberal compensation from Rowland, and had been promised an even larger reward if she continued her attendance on this pretty but unfortunate young woman who had so near a chance once of being a viscountess. She regarded Meta with compassion, but her cupidity overcame her natural good feeling. Whatever my lord commanded she considered was law, and Meta was only a factor to be dealt with kindly yet watchfully; she was not to be trusted alone.

"I have told you," said Meta, haughtily, "not to address me as Mrs Hamilton. I shall be glad if you will kindly remember that when you speak to me again." She rose from her seat and entered the adjoining boudoir, which had been furnished as a replica of the one in the Kensington town house. The beautiful blue and silver garniture which had once been such a source of delight to her made her pause in her anger, just as a mild answer turneth away wrath. Everything that was pleasant to the eyes, to the senses, to the artistic perceptions with which she was so gifted, here met Meta's gaze and held her entranced. Here were the thousand proofs of Rowland's love; she had so desired to have such a room to call her own, and her whim had been gratified; and now, behold, she felt as she gazed the *vanitas vanitatum* of all her fond desires. With such had she been wiled to her ruin; with such toys had she been betrayed! And now she must give them all up and return to her former life of drudgery and dependence. Meta put her hand to her throbbing brow weighted with a dull feeling of coming sorrow too great for endurance. What would become of her now? She had lost both name and reputation, and no one would ever care to receive her into their homes after what had happened. Oh, misery, to think that she had come to such a pass!

Convalescence

She seated herself (for she was weak still) on a little velvet settee near the open window and began to count, one by one, the events of the last six weeks. It was a painful process, the like of which she had seldom experienced; it imaged before her all her unhappy fate. What was she now? No maid, no wife, nor widow. Only a woman, unfortunate, deceived and despoiled of honour, name and reputation. The question twice repeated to herself brought with it all the sense of injury; it revived the burning hatred she had felt for Rowland and the mad desire for revenge. But conscience convicted her of wrong and called her back to the remembrance of her own share in the general ruin.

"Why," it cried loudly, "did you throw yourself on his mercy and protection when you had been warned as to the manner of man he was by that saint in the flesh, Robert Falkner? Why did you encourage his visits to you at the Avondale Hotel, and thus allow him to compromise your fair fame and entangle you with his deceits and perfidy? Why did you not go straight to your aunt's house on leaving the Balfours, and confide in that lady all that concerned you and Rowland? Had you done so your present misfortunes would never have befallen you. She, wiser and more experienced in the world's ways, would have inquired about him, and you would have eventually discovered his real position as a married man, and thus would have been saved from the cruel straits in which you are now placed. He took advantage, as any sensual man would have done under the circumstances, of your helpless, unprotected state, and you have only yourself to blame for having tempted him to your undoing. He acted for the best, dictated by his passion for you; you were too much a temptation for him to resist. In your mad rage you nearly stained those hands of yours with blood by that futile attempt to—"

Here Meta stopped abruptly in her self-condemnation,

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and with her usual impulse rose to seek Mrs Hunt. Susannah had stood near the door all the while, watching her every movement and the fitful expression of her face. It was her profound conviction that the disappointed young lady meditated suicide, and now as she noted the intense melancholy and forlornness of her attitude as she sat there and thought, Mrs Hunt was more than ever convinced that she was right. She retreated from the door and had regained her former seat in the morning-room, and seemed as cool and composed as possible when Mrs Hamilton entered.

"Will you ask—?" A long pause, as though she were doubtful how to denominate Rowland, until Susannah smilingly interrupted with,—

"Who? My Lord Viscount would you say?"

Meta gazed at her wonderingly. It was true, she thought, Rowland's father was dead, and he had now succeeded to the title.

"Ask his lordship to come and speak to me," said Meta at last, hesitatingly.

"His lordship is not here," responded Susannah, cheerfully.

"Not here!" echoed Meta, astonished. "Has he left Worthley for good then?"

"No; he will doubtless return in a few days."

Meta looked disappointed; she wanted there and then to confront Rowland once more; her impulsive nature sought to be convinced, to feel comforted that her present prolonged residence in his house was against her will. Necessity has no law, and as long as she was incapacitated to act for herself she must consider herself at his mercy. She wanted to tell him all this and more, and thus satisfy her wounded pride, and her disappointment was keen on hearing that he was not at Worthley.

She went back to her seat in the blue and silver boudoir, and this time gazed vacantly out into the lovely grounds, whilst the tears silently trickled down her pale cheeks and a great sorrow and care possessed her. They

Success Brought No Happiness

were tears born of her weakness ; in that moment she felt the intense loneliness of her position and its intense falseness.

CHAPTER XLV

SUCCESS HAS BROUGHT ME NO HAPPINESS

MR GEORGE AUGUSTUS DALE, the co-respondent in the late divorce suit, duly heard of Rowland's succession to his father's title, and the news caused him to use very unparliamentary language for the space of at least five minutes. Hemmed in by his recent bereavement, his enemy was at present invulnerable, and Dale therefore could not carry out his intention to fight him on French soil.

He called on his cousin, now the Viscountess Rowland, and confided to her his trouble.

"Why do you want to fight him?" she asked. Dale stood with his back to the mantelpiece; he felt chivalrous, a thorough Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*, but her question puzzled him. "In the first place," he explained, "you are my cousin, and as you have no brother to take up the cudgels in your defence, I constitute myself the right person to do so. The fellow deserves being shot at like a dog; he has more than ruined you."

"He has not ruined me at all," replied the lady, coldly. "On the contrary, it is I who have done him harm by my success. But he is a man whom you can't absolutely ruin—"

"By Jove, you are right!" interrupted Dale. "The devil takes care of his own."

"I am suing for a judicial separation and alimony to the amount of five thousand a year," said the Viscountess, smiling. "Were you to fight him as you wish, my

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desire for a separation would be questioned, and the alimony denied me on the score of my doubtful relationship with you. It is my will that you will let him alone, for you can do no good by interfering."

She spoke coldly; the ordeal she had recently gone through had not improved her appearance; there was a bitter, cynical expression in her face, and her manner was repellent almost to rudeness.

"What are you going to do with yourself now that the affair is all over?" he asked after a while.

"I am going to live out in the sunshine, so that I can be clearly seen by all the world and my actions open for general inspection. A woman separated from her husband cannot be too careful. And you, Cousin George, what will you do with yourself now that you are no longer co-respondent in a sensational divorce suit?"

"I shall travel on the Continent and avoid every pretty young married woman I meet as I would avoid the devil and all his works. I don't fancy there is the remotest chance of my ever playing the part of co-respondent and running the risk of paying heavy damages again." And he got up, shook himself, and held out his hand. "Good-bye," said he. "Since you won't let me fight him for you, the sooner I go the better. I hope you will get the alimony all right; the separation is already an accomplished fact."

"And you think five thousand a year will help to mend a broken heart and restore me the brilliant position I have lost in the great world? Oh, George, how little you know women when you judge them so harshly! If Rowland came to me to-morrow with one word of pardon for the past I would forget all and be again his wife. I have never wronged him, even in thought, though I have felt bitterly against him all these months when he has been trying his level best to ruin me. But I can afford to forgive and forget, since the law has justified me in the eyes of the world and he knows that his honour has been safe in my hands. But

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the breach between us is irrevocable. He does not love me, and were I to die to-morrow he would marry again the next day and defy conventionality to show how much he hated me. But I am not going to die to oblige him" (and she laughed bitterly); "I am young and strong and seven-and-twenty, I shall possibly survive him. Oh! there is comfort in that thought; think of it, George, when you are far away in foreign lands, that your fair cousin is doomed to grass-widowhood all her life, but the weeper and the coronet are denied her by reason of her husband's hatred." She quitted him abruptly, for she was on the verge of tears, and he stood in the middle of the room and whistled to himself, which was *his* way of expressing emotion. He was sorry for her, but he could do nothing. Seeing that she had no intention of returning, he took his departure, and his whistle ended in a muffled curse of "that infernal cad, Jack Rowland!"

CHAPTER XLVI

A LAST INTERVIEW

As soon as he was free to leave the castle Rowland returned to Worthley. He had heard of Meta's request to see him and was eager for an interview. The three weeks that had elapsed had softened his resentment; he felt he could overlook everything in the desire for a reconciliation. His wife had got her separation and the alimony she applied for: he would never be troubled again from that quarter. If Meta was willing to be happy with him, there was no reason why they should not come together again and weave a new love's golden spell in some quiet corner of the globe.

As usual, Rowland only considered himself in the

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matter. The safeguard of a woman's honour and reputation was nothing to him. Therefore it was with mingled feelings and a rapid pulse that he waited to see Meta in the library.

The sight of that room recalled no unpleasant associations: his was not a nature to look back into the past, but one which dallied in the present and gloried in the future. He fancied himself magnanimous in this desire to receive Meta into his good graces. It was better, too, to ignore the fact of the injury he had done her by his perfidy. To Rowland, the evil he had wrought died with the day on which it was committed; he put the thought of it completely away since there could be no remedy for his sin; his personal happiness was much more important, and to secure this had always been the aim of his life from boyhood. It was his present aim as he beheld Meta again.

The first sight of her, so pale and fragile and unlike her past self, shocked him greatly: it seemed as if she had aged ten years within the last three weeks. The plain black frock she wore heightened the pallor of her thin face, and the wan, haggard expression of mouth and eyes revealed the sufferings she had undergone. He hastened to bring forward an easy-chair for her use, and showed no little concern in his manner as he did so. For the first few moments he could not find voice to speak: even his conscience, blunt as it was, pricked him uncomfortably as he gazed on her with a sort of lump in his throat.

Meta flushed painfully as her eyes fell on him; but she strove to control her emotion, and succeeded so far as to politely decline the proffered seat, saying she would prefer the couch, which was right opposite the mantelpiece, and where she seated herself composedly enough.

She chose this seat with a purpose: she knew he would take up his position as usual with his back to the fireplace, it being his favourite attitude, and she wished to face him during the interview. It was an experience,

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this *vis-à-vis* with a villain; possibly she would never have such a chance again as long as she lived. She devoutly hoped not.

Rowland fulfilled her anticipation with some reluctance, and then fell to examining her appearance. He noticed that she was not only attired very plainly, but that she absolutely wore no ornament of any sort: there was no ring on her finger, except one which had in the past belonged to her mother. Her hair, which had been cut close to the head during her mental delirium, curled naturally and gave her a very French look. It was the only detail about her he did not like, and he regretted the loss of it as if it had been his own.

"A week ago," began Meta, in all her self-possession, "I asked to see you. I was told by your servants that you had gone to bury your father, to assume your new title, and to—" She hesitated.

"To bury the hatchet, rather say, Meta," he interpolated in his softest voice. "That is what I wish to do now, if you will let me."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Why need we be any other than what we have been?" replied he, eagerly. "There is a past, and there is a present, and a future. Let us endeavour to forget the past by burying the hatchet, to live in the present as happily as we can, and yet anticipate the future brightly, knowing that it is the unexpected that always happens." He would have come up to her as he spoke, but a flash from her eyes and an imperious gesture of repulsion warned him.

"If you bury the hatchet at all, it will be with your lawful wife, whom for some reason or other best known to yourself you so eagerly wish to get rid of. There can be no making of peace with me this side the grave; and no hope either of any reconciliation: you and I must stand apart for ever and for ever."

"I am sorry to hear that," was his tame reply. "And what do you propose to do with yourself?"

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Remember that the responsibility of having once been as good as my wife still remains. You cannot blot out the fact of your connection with me so easily as you have evidently forgotten the love you once said you felt for me." There was a ring of triumph in his voice : he knew he had her there.

"Whatever has passed between us can never be again," she returned bitterly. "I have not come here to hold out hopes of a final reconciliation, but merely to tell you of my intention to leave Worthley to-morrow. I should have left it before, but I was told that my lord had given strict orders that I should not wander beyond the walled-in garden, where all my movements have been watched, as though I had been a prisoner in your care. May I ask the reason of such treatment?"

"Need you ask? Have you forgotten a certain tragic incident three weeks ago when you—"

"I remember," she interrupted, a spasm of pain passing over her face. "And I thank you for refreshing my memory. I have not forgotten either a certain comic ceremony at the Register Office where you and I were the principal actors in the scene." And she laughed bitterly.

Rowland bit his lip and stifled a tremendous oath : he felt now that there was no hope of any peace with her, and he cursed her obduracy as one of the incomprehensible evils of life. Her speech put him on the defensive : if she turned nasty, so could he, since it must be a war to the knife between them.

Meta observed his silence and the gathering gloom on his dark face, but her high temper bore her along recklessly. "My Lord Viscount Rowland," said she, sarcastically, "when I leave Worthley I have some intention of revealing my painful story to my father, Colonel Benson, who, though he has not been a model parent to me within the last three years, is still a man of integrity and would hotly resent the evil I have been exposed to by your perfidy. I think you can judge for

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yourself how he will act towards you by appealing to the law for redress or some other form of punishment which may prove less dignified certainly but still would answer just as well."

"Colonel Benson is free to do as he likes, and so are you ; I question the freedom of neither. But you forget there is one overwhelming obstacle which cannot be overridden !" He paused to give his words due impressiveness. At this stage of the interview he had given up all hopes of her ; but she was in his power and he would make her feel it, unmanly as it was.

"And what is this overwhelming obstacle ?" she asked, tossing her head defiantly.

"Your memory is short, my dear Meta. Try and think, and you will remember well enough."

"I understand," she replied after a while ; "you are alluding to my insane attempt on Mrs Hunt's life ? Would you take advantage of that considering the state of mind I was in ?"

"I have nothing to do with it, as I was absent at the time. So long as you remain friendly to my interests neither Hunt nor his wife, I daresay, would trouble themselves to prosecute you. But I cannot answer for their continued silence should you take the law in your own hands and act against me."

Meta held her breath in pain as she listened ; he was quite right, she thought, and she felt she was in his power. "Nevertheless, I wish to leave Worthley immediately," she said with decision. "I presume you will not dare to detain me here against my will ?"

"You are welcome to leave it, but only on one condition."

"And that ?"

"That you promise on your solemn oath never to betray what has passed to man, woman or child. If you will make this promise to me with intention to keep it I will provide for you as needful, and arrange for you to leave Worthley as soon as you like."

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"And what if I refuse to take the oath?"

Rowland shrugged his shoulders, and the action had a world of meaning in it.

Meta was standing now and was coming up to where he stood with steps still feeble from her trying illness. "Rowland," she said, "don't you feel very much ashamed of yourself?"

He looked at her guardedly, for he did not feel sure of her sanity even then. She smiled curiously as she saw him recede from her.

"There is no need for you to fear," said she, sardonically, "you are such a brave man!" And she went back to her seat with that half-bitter, half-curious smile stereotyped on her pale face.

"I am not afraid of you," he returned angrily. "I was considered one of the best athletes in Oxford, but then I had to deal with men there and not with a modern Borgia like yourself."

The smile vanished from her face and she was again serious as she said, "Tell me what you wish me to do and let me depart in peace. To-morrow as early as I can possibly manage it I wish to leave Worthley and return to London."

"To your aunt?" he asked with interest.

"Perhaps," she replied shortly.

"Will you take the oath?"

"No, Rowland, I will not. But I will make a solemn promise to you that I will never prosecute you for bigamy; nor will I allow any other to do so on my behalf. Is that sufficient?"

"Quite," he replied, satisfied. "And now to business. When you leave this you will not find yourself penniless. There is the ten thousand pounds I banked in your name at Glynn and Co.'s. The interest of it is three hundred a year." He stopped as he noted her intention to speak.

"I will not touch a penny of it," she said quickly.

"That is unwise; you cannot subsist on air; food, clothing and comfortable lodgings are necessary in your

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frail health. I presume you will not go governing again? No; it is better not. Three hundred a year would, I believe, ensure you the ordinary comforts of life. Should you require more, you can apply to me."

"When I leave you to-morrow, Rowland, you will never hear from me again. This is the last time we shall ever stand face to face."

He expected her to rise and quit the room when she had said this, but she still retained her seat and seemed plunged in thought.

He watched her without a trace of bitterness; so long as she did not give him any trouble he was willing to let her go out of his sight.

"Rowland," she asked suddenly, "did you not tell me that the Balfours were travelling on the Continent?"

"I did," he replied, surprised. "They are at present in Montreux, and they will eventually winter at Cannes. You do not contemplate returning to them, do you?" And he smiled to think of it.

She was too full of her own thoughts to resent the hidden sneer of the question. "No," she answered simply, "though they have been much in my mind lately. I have been wondering whether they knew of your divorce suit, and knowing that you had a wife already could allow me to be wilfully insulted and deceived. Did you take them into your confidence, Rowland, and ask them to keep your private affairs from my knowledge? I have fancied that you must have done so, for they kept the secret so well and helped to deceive me amongst them."

"They quite thought with me that my divorce suit would end successfully; the Balfours are my friends, and knew well the love I bore you. It seemed only a matter of time then."

"And Winifred," continued Meta, without heeding him, "dear little Winifred, whom I loved so, she came and told me that your wife was dead, and that you had made her understand that it was so. I wonder,

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Rowland, if she will ever know the mischief she helped to do me by her innocent chatter? But I shall never forgive the Balfours, never, never; so God help me, I trust swift retribution will befall them for their dishonourable, heartless conduct to one placed as I was." She rose and quitted the room, and he saw her never again face to face.

But the next morning, as she was taking her departure, he caught a glimpse of her from the window, though she saw him not. Jenkins, the courier, drove her in a closed carriage to Worcester Station. Mrs Hunt had pleaded to see her off, but was repulsed. She had gained tremendously in worldly goods by her acquaintance with Meta, inasmuch as every vestige of wardrobe that had been purchased with Rowland's money and worn as honeymoon frocks was handed to her keeping for good and all. Meta took away with her only boxes that had been hers, and they contained such clothes as she possessed in the days of her dependence. The night before she had sent down to him a casket containing all the jewels he had ever given her, and with it the identical blade that she had put to such terrible use.

He hid them away out of his sight, and wished in his heart he could as easily wipe out the memory of her and the sin of it, for the thought of both were and would be for ever an endless remorse and heartache to him.

CHAPTER XLVII

A LETTER TO THE DEAD, AND AN ANSWER FROM THE LIVING

SEVERAL days before her departure from Worthley Meta had diligently scanned the advertisement sheet of *The Morning Post* in search for suitable apartments, and

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she had also written in reply. Therefore she knew her destination, and was able to tell the cabman where to drive her to on reaching Euston Station. She had chosen rooms in a house in Kensington, and on her arrival received an almost affectionate greeting from the landlady, who was the widow of a doctor, and plumed herself on being a gentlewoman in reduced circumstances.

Much as she would have liked, poor, homeless Meta dared not solicit her aunt's hospitality without first entering into an explanation. No matter in what way she looked at it this was a painful prospect. Her still feeble health forbade any undue excitement, and she knew there would be excitement as well as unpleasantness before her when the inevitable moment for explanation should arrive. It was a weary prospect at the best; the loneliness of her lodgings and the contrast of all around her to the brilliant home she had recently quitted only added to the weariness of it. She thought of another plan which would save awkward questions being put to her by her over-curious and over-fussy kinswoman—and this was to write to Mrs Falkner and offer herself as useful companion to that lady. Once in her conversation Mrs Falkner had hinted such a wish, and with an affectionate and playful pat on her cheek had said, "My dear, when Winifred is tired of you, you must come to me and be my help and companion; it would be such a boon to have you."

And Meta had promised that she would not forget the request. Her only one objection to this idea was that there was Robert Falkner to reckon as host in the matter; but she mentally overruled this objection when she remembered that he had himself echoed this wish and had urged her to accept it in her last meeting with him at the garden-party—even after she had point-blank refused to be his wife. She knew that so saintly a character could bear no malice; and the prospect of unburdening her troubles to her old friend

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greatly soothed her sad heart. She felt sure that Mrs Falkner would indeed prove a friend in need. With this hope before her Meta sat down the same evening of her arrival at Earl's Court Square to inscribe a suitable letter to that lady.

"I know you will feel it hard to forgive me," she wrote, "considering the silence with which I have treated you all these weeks. But it was not, believe me, in my power to write, much as I have wished to do so. Even now necessity spurs me on to solicit your former favour, and to make a request which I trust you will be able to grant. I am again thrown on my own resources and am homeless: will you think it a liberty if I ask you humbly to accept my services as companion? But before I receive any kindness from you I must frankly confide to you all my unhappy experience since I left the Balfours, for I should not like to deceive you in any one way. I have been very seriously ill and am still far from strong. I wonder if you could manage to come and see me instead of my coming to you? I am in apartments just now, and did not go to my aunt at all. Please, do come, dear Mrs Falkner, I feel so terribly lonely and friendless, and am in want of your help and sympathy. It would be a matter of charity for you to come to one in my position, and I pray that you will not disappoint me."

She ended the letter affectionately, and sent it to the post that night.

She slept well and peacefully, and when she woke up the next morning she found it hard to think that she was no longer at Worthley and the past for ever done with so far as Rowland was concerned. An early cup of tea was brought to her bedside by the housemaid, and Meta almost started to see a strange face, so familiar had she become with that of Mrs Hunt's constantly within

A Letter to the Dead

her sight. An ineffable feeling of delight thrilled through her when she realised her recovered freedom.

About eleven that morning she received a telegram with these words :—

“I am coming this afternoon.—FALKNER.”

Tears of gratitude filled her eyes, and in ecstasy she kissed the paper, and prayed that she might not be tempted to abuse such friendships as were offered her. How the time passed she knew not, or how idly and nervously she frittered away the long hours, quelling as much as she could the mental excitement under which she laboured, it was impossible to say ; but when the hour drew near she found herself too feeble almost to stand at the window and watch for her expected visitor ; physical exhaustion rendered it necessary that she should stretch herself on the couch and rest there until the bell and knocker should announce the arrival.

“I am so weak,” she murmured helplessly. “I do hope I shall be able to explain to her lucidly all that has happened—and she is not over-strong either. How good of her to come herself.”

An hour later a very gentle rat-a-tat-tat roused her from the half sleep she had fallen into, and the next minute the door opened, and Meta hurried forward eager to embrace and be embraced by her friend.

“It is a Mr Falkner who has called to see you, miss,” said the housemaid, smiling.

Before she could express or manifest her disappointment he was already in the room, and with grave, kindly smiles was telling her how pleased he was to see her again.

“But your mother ?” she gasped. And then her quick eyes noted the deep band of crape surmounting the round clerical hat he carried in his hand, and she turned deadly pale.

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CHAPTER XLVIII

A FRIEND IN NEED IS A FRIEND INDRED

HE led her to a seat and himself took one near her.

"My mother is dead," he said gently. "She is better off. I have come to you as her ambassador. You see," he continued simply, "I could not help reading your letter. I am sorry you have been ill. I ought not, perhaps, to have told you my news so suddenly."

She drooped her pretty head like some broken flower, and was weeping quietly.

There was bitter memory as well as grief busy in her wounded heart, and the sight of him had roused both to life. It was for such a graceless wretch as Jack Rowland she had spurned this man's love and protection. How different would have been her fate, what sorrow and shame she would have been spared, had she clung faithfully to Robert Falkner, her first love!

With a strong effort she controlled herself. "Tell me all about it," she said presently in the midst of her tears.

"There is nothing much to tell," he replied in his quiet, soothing way. "Her time had come and she died like a true Christian. I was to give you her love, and her many expressions of regret that Mrs Bankes had been invited at all to meet you. She was much worried also at your sudden departure. Just before her death she begged me promise that I would be your friend whenever you needed my friendship; she referred to you constantly and wished very much to see you again. I inquired of your whereabouts at The Homestead and

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was told that Mrs Balfour was not sure of your address ; it was somewhere in Notting Hill they told me." He sighed wearily as he ended ; the remembrance of that anxious time and his own misery revived the old feeling of pain at the sight of her.

"I did not go to my aunt," said Meta, impulsively.

"Have you been lodging in this house then since you left Epping ?" he asked, in as natural a tone as he could command. The desire in him was great to know her life for the last six weeks, though he refrained from forcing her confidence.

"No," she replied, "I only came here yesterday."

She hesitated ; her mind was in that condition when sympathy with her misfortunes was an absolute necessity. She longed to tell him all, but how to begin she knew not. Perhaps Robert Falkner read her face aright as he watched its changes and grieved in his heart that trouble had befallen this creature whom he still loved so.

"Your mother was the only friend I depended on in my sorrow, and she is dead," commenced Meta, with forced composure.

"She leaves her son to serve you," he replied readily.

"How can you serve me when you are ignorant of my misfortunes ?"

"I am not so ignorant as you think. Believe me, my poor child, I have guessed all." He had risen from his seat in great agitation. She could see how white and distressed was his countenance, how expressive of the deep sympathy he was feeling in her behalf.

"All !" she repeated with a sob.

"Yes," he returned, in a melancholy voice. "I have not been a priest of Christ's Church for sixteen years without some knowledge of reading trouble in the human face divine. You have been deceived, most foully deceived by that fiend in human shape ; he has wiled you to your ruin by tempting you with his riches and rank, and when circumstances revealed to you his

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perfidy you left him. Is not that true? Am I not right?" he asked passionately.

"Alas! Robert, you have guessed but too rightly. I have been the victim of a most foul offence. As God will judge me, I am innocent of committing sin." And little by little, as her tears would allow her, she told him the whole history of Rowland's treachery.

"I meant to tell your mother all this," she said in conclusion. "I felt that she would pity me and love me all the more for my misfortunes. I dare not, you see, take measures to punish my betrayer, for I promised that I should not myself do so, or allow another to expose him. I have confided to you everything, knowing that as a priest you are bound by honour not to reveal confidences made to you."

She glanced at him timidly, and a wave of emotion came over her at the sight of that motionless figure bowed in grief.

The whole nature of the man was paralysed, shaken to its very centre, as he listened to her sad story, and now silently he was praying for patience, for grace to forgive the wretch who had wronged her.

"I am so friendless," she continued mournfully. "I may as well go away—right away from England—where I am not known, and live an exile the rest of my life. My father does not want me and will not miss me. My aunt will be ashamed of me when once she suspects my misfortunes. These are the only relations I possess, so what does it matter where I live, provided I can reconcile myself to my fate and forget that I was ever happy in the past?"

"Your life is not your own to throw away as you propose; it is an invaluable possession which you must learn to direct for the future under wiser and more simple rules." He had suddenly risen and had come up to her, speaking in a strangely solemn manner. "Your life will be my care, my responsibility," he continued tenderly. "As long as you have my friendship, so long

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as you can regard me as your brother, how can you cease hoping for better, happier days, in which a fuller, wiser and more godly existence await you? Do not despond; trust in God, and you need never fear the future."

He paused a while, then with face somewhat averted, continued,—

"I am not going to preach to you, because I think the memory of your experience will ever be an eloquent sermon to warn you against future wilfulness. I am just going to take your life in my hands for the next six months or so, and try my very utmost to make you happy by healing all the wounds that another's sin has inflicted; and I am going to try my very best to make that soul of yours a beautiful offering to God." He turned on her his sweetest smile; his manner was perfectly simple; he addressed her with that quiet air of possession and masterfulness which had ever been his strongest characteristic when dealing with the distressed. There was even a suspicion of cheerfulness in his tone as he continued. "Do you think, little sister, because you have been unfortunate, all the world must turn against you—even I, Robert Falkner, my mother's son, and your ever devoted ally? On the contrary, your sorrows are my own, and I do feel them none the less when I advise you to refrain from all thoughts of bitterness for the past; let God punish that villain as he deserves; retribution will befall him before long; but for you, the victim of dishonour, reparation sweet and bountiful await in the coming days. I am going to ask you to visit an aunt of mine, a Mrs D'Arcy. You may have heard my mother speak of her? When I read your letter this morning the idea struck me that she would be indeed pleased to receive you as a dear friend of my mother's, and I wrote to her before coming here to say that I should spend a week of my summer holidays with her, and that I wished her to extend an invitation to you. I gave her a few particulars about yourself and my urgent reasons for so asking her this favour."

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Meta shook her head despondently as she replied, "Your aunt, Mrs D'Arcy, must be informed of something of my life for the last six weeks before I can be received as a member of her household."

"Not necessarily," he returned, smiling at her earnestness. "Do you think my mother would have insisted on such a thing? Not at all likely. I will acquaint Mrs D'Arcy with as much of your life as it is right that she should know. She will not ask you any questions but just receive you with open arms. We shall both call and see you to-morrow, and arrange for your immediate removal to Richmond. When you are once settled there you must communicate with your aunt, Miss Wilton, and also your father. There must be no more family quarrels," he concluded laughingly, as he held out his hand to take leave of her. "Good-bye. I must go now, or Mrs D'Arcy will think that I am not coming after all this evening to see her. Will you promise to keep up your spirits in the meantime?"

"You are too good. I am not worthy of your friendship," was all the reply she could give him.

"We will see," he returned cheerfully, and left her.

CHAPTER XLIX

THE HAVEN OF PEACE AT LAST

THE eight o'clock post next morning brought her a cordial letter from Mrs D'Arcy. Had Mrs Falkner herself written it, it could not have been more warmly expressed.

"My dear nephew tells me," wrote the lady, "that

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you are in want of a home, and would gladly give your services as companion in exchange for one. As I am living all alone in a tolerably large house, and am often tired of my own company in consequence, I shall be most happy to have you to stay with me as long as ever you like. I shall feel I am performing an act of love and duty to my sister's memory to do towards you as she would have done were she now living. Believe me, I have very often heard her speak of you in the most affectionate terms, so that you can never seem a stranger to me. We are coming to-morrow morning to see you, and if I can prevail upon you to return with me to Richmond, I shall be delighted. Think of this possible move in the meantime, and make all preparation in readiness."

For the first time in her life Meta forgot to be wilful, or that she had a will of her own in the matter. She obediently packed her things in readiness, so that when her visitors arrived that morning they had no difficulty whatever in taking her away with them. She had determined to shunt all responsibility on the strong, broad shoulders of Robert Falkner, and to be led a passive instrument for the future. He had bade her hope and trust, and she was willing to do both.

Mrs D'Arcy proved herself to be a friend in need ; and Meta felt that she could not feel thankful enough for all the generous kindness she received from this good woman. In that quiet home in Richmond, with its prevailing atmosphere of love, her broken spirits soon recovered their normal strength and cheerfulness. Then was she not continually made happy by the presence of Robert Falkner, whose week's holiday lengthened into many months, for, shortly after his resignation of High Beech Parsonage, he took up his abode near the house that sheltered the girl he loved. His intention was to seek an appointment as English chaplain abroad.

One day, when Meta had been nearly six months

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with Mrs D'Arcy, he entered with the news of his success.

Mrs D'Arcy hoped that it was not to some swampy place in Africa that the Bishop had appointed him to. She had a wholesome horror of the Central African Mission, and a terrible fear of her nephew's weakness for the missionary life.

Meta turned very pale, and tried in vain to suppress the pain in her heart.

"You have guessed wrongly," said Falkner, brightly. "I will give you another chance."

Mrs D'Arcy laughed; she could afford to laugh now that he had flatly denied her gloomy forebodings.

"I never made a right guess in my life," said she; "but wherever it is, I will come and keep house for you until you are married."

"That is generous of you, but perhaps I may not need you," and he glanced shyly at Meta, who, however, did not see the look, so intent did she appear over her embroidery.

His aunt observed the glance, and nodded intelligently as she was leaving the room. "Tell Miss Benson all about it," said she, smiling. "I will return presently to congratulate you."

An hour afterwards she returned, and Robert Falkner led blushing, happy Meta to her, saying, "I don't think I shall need you for my housekeeper. Meta has promised to be my wife, and our home will be at Cannes when we are married."

"Did I not say I would come presently and congratulate you?" said the lady, kissing them both in genuine delight. "And I do so with all my heart!"



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